

From the Community  
Digital Archives of Jenukuruba

# Playing with the children of the forest



Ksheerasagar

Translated from Kannada  
by Nandini Srinivasan

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Translated by: Translated from the Kannada original

*"Kaadina Makkala Odanaatadalli"*

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into English by **NANDINI SRINIVASAN** with the permission of the Author

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## **Contents**

Dedication		v
Preface		vii
Chapter 1	The Rat Diggers	1
Chapter 2	The Creeper Flute and Colourful Tattoos	7
Chapter 3	Mischief of the Pundana Termite, The Lion Ant	15
Chapter 4	Hunt for the Squirrel	21
Chapter 5	The Flying Beetle and the Bamboo Shoot	27
Chapter 6	Coloured Ducks and the Leaf	31
Chapter 7	Wooden Dolls that Breathed and Mushrooms that Turned into Bombs	37
Chapter 8	Tangy Gooseberries that Leave Sweet Taste	45
Chapter 9	The Cricket and the Whirl Wind	51
Chapter 10	Chandra Makuta Bird - The Hooper	57
Chapter 11	Catching Fish and Crabs	61
Chapter 12	Hunting for the Keera - The Mongoose	67
Chapter 13	The Regular Winged Visitors	73
Chapter 14	Touch Me Not	79
Chapter 15	The Mouse Trap and the Ghost of Fire	85
Chapter 16	Fifteen Years later	91
Glossary		99

# Dedication

I dedicate this book to:

Gange alias Sannami,  
Sannaswamy alias Kunta  
Puttammanni alias Mare  
Nagamani alias Nayimani,  
Kenchiah alias Gombe.

You are the young buds,  
who moved with me,  
Buds who fell down on the earth,  
Even before you could blossom into lovely wild flowers.

You are no more today. . . .

But please be born again as the honey bee,  
As the butterfly, the bird,  
As the trees and plants . . . .

The Earth, the Sky, Water, Wind, Light..  
All rightfully belong to you.  
I dedicate this book to all of you.

## Preface

**T**he Kannada book '*Kaadina Makkala Odanaatadalli*' is about the lives of Jenukuruba children, who are one with nature and open themselves to different dimensions of learning. It is indeed a matter of pride that it is being published in English.

The main hope of the book is that curiosity and wonder about the mysteries of nature become an integral part of learning. If such efforts find their way into the present educational system, it will ensure that children do not lead mechanical lives and are not far from nature. I hope this book will further advocate the idea.

After writing about the lives of Jenukuruba children in Kannada, when I visited the same Girijan Haadi nearly 15 years later, I noticed that their lives had been completely torn apart. The condition of this Haadi and its inhabitants is a reflection of the government's apathy towards their welfare and a proof of what can happen if suitable alternative measures are not provided to people displaced from the forests.

Now that the 'Forest Dwellers' Rights Over the Forest Act 2006' has come into existence, we should hopefully wait and see if their lives become better.

I cordially thank the National Folklore Support Centre for publishing this book. I also thank its Director Mr. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and other friends in the organisation. My thanks are also due to Ms. Nandini Srinivasan for having translated the book into English, my friend Mr. Kikkeri Narayan, Somanna, tribal friends and Prof. Ramesh Samudaya.

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## CHAPTER 1

December 1, 1994

### The Rat Diggers

It was 4 in the evening when we reached Navile Haadi. Whenever I visit this *haadi*, I normally stroll around in the thin forests around the *haadi*, with the kids of the *haadi* in tow. So, every time I come here the kids gather around me and tug at me saying, "Come on, let's go to the forest."

But today, seeing that the children were not around, I asked the *Shishuvihar* teacher where all of them were. She pointed towards the east saying, "Look, they are all at the cotton fields. They are probably collecting the cotton fallen on the ground."

We went towards them, but they seemed to be unaware of our presence. One boy was digging the earth with an *ada donne*, while the other was scooping out the mud from a burrow. Another had pressed his ears to the ground listening to something intently and giving instructions on which direction to dig. The boy who was scooping up the mud frequently ran his fingers in the mud looking for rat's droppings or rat hair stuck to the mud.

They suddenly decided not to continue digging there and started digging in another direction. "How do you know that there are no rats in this direction?" I asked curiously, to which Bangi gave a very convincing reply, showing us a handful of the scooped out mud "Look Saa! The droppings in

## 2 Playing with the children of the forest

the mud have dried up, meaning the rats were here two days ago, but have moved on to another burrow now."

They started digging the ground above another burrow with the *ada donne*. This *ada donne* is an integral part of the *Girijans*. It is a very handy tool and has many uses. They dig out edible roots and tubers from the ground using this. They also use it to dig deep into the burrows of the *todas* (rats) to catch them and also to collect the paddy stored in these burrows. The paddy collected from these burrows is aptly named 'Toda paddy'. This *ada donne*, mainly a digging tool, is a desi version of a regular spade. A head of a small iron rod around one and half feet long is flattened and sharpened at the front and fixed to the sturdy stick. It's a common sight to see these *Girijans* with this digging tool propped upon their shoulders, wherever they go. It's their inseparable companion while on the move!

Once when I was at the *haadi*, I saw Kempamma running her fingers through the paddy that she had spread on the ground. Assuming she had got it from her employer as a reward for her work, I gently asked her, "That's good, Kempamma! The *gowda* has given you paddy today as *coolie* (wages) for your labour, instead of the usual sand-mixed and muddy *ragi*?" "No, no! This is Toda paddy, sir!" she replied, trying to clean the mud stuck to the paddy grains. The name sounded unfamiliar and I assumed it was one of the varieties of paddy, just like the *Ratnachudi*, *Bangara*, *Sanna* etc. I was surprised, though, at how much mud was stuck to the paddy. Kempamma's explanation cleared my doubts.

She explained that Toda paddy was the paddy that was collected near the paddy fields by the *todas*. In later days, I joined the crowd when they went 'rat hunting' and saw the huge amounts of paddy that these rodents stored in their burrows.

The planning that goes into making these burrows is amazing. The rodents dig in different directions near the fields to make very lengthy burrows, many metres in length, in fact. The rats are constantly on the move, but these people have the uncanny skill of finding which burrows the rats have settled in, when they come hunting. They stick their ears to the ground



to catch the noise of the rats and start digging based on their instinct. The droppings and the rat's hair stuck to the mud that they scoop out from the burrows are also indicators of the rat's presence. The 'mud testing' also helps them judge whether there is paddy inside and estimate how many rats live there. If they feel there are only a couple of rats and no paddy, they don't bother to continue digging at all. The rats always move and live in groups and collect grain together. The *Girijans* are on the lookout for such rat colonies. Some colonies have more than 25 rats and the catch here would yield 5 to 10 kgs of paddy! These 'burrow diggers,' however, are kind. If they see small, young rats when they dig the burrows, they leave them there and cover up the burrows with loose mud.

For land owners, these rodents which loot their fields are a nightmare indeed! No wonder they have a soft corner for these *Girijans*, who 'dig' out their 'enemies.' However, they are a little cut up with the rat diggers, because they don't kill the baby rats.

The *Girijans* though believe in taking just as much as they need and nothing more. "We only take the rats to eat them...We don't need these young ones," they say, as they put them back in their burrows safely covering it with some loose mud.

Twenty rats or two rats, whatever the catch, two rats are always brought back live to their *haadi*. They break the teeth of these rats and these toothless creatures become dear pets for their children. The rats become so friendly with the children that you can see them scampering all over them.

Gange and Gowri are two young girls in Navile Haadi. Live mice are inseparable toys for these two girls. They need to keep clutching them always. Try taking it away from them and they will cry their hearts out! They even sleep with their pet rats next to them. So attached are they to these rats, that they keep waking up in the middle of the night to make sure the rats are there. They nudge their mothers to ask if their pets are safe.

"Look Saa, a cute rat!" Basava cried out, as he held a rat by its tail. I congratulated him for his catch and went into the forests with the children. Kariya held the tiny rat on his palm and kept stroking it saying, "I'm not going

to kill you little one!" When I asked him why he said that, he looked at me and said that it was what was always said. He put the rat on the ground and chased it as it scampered around. We all chased it around and played with it for sometime. When Kariya took the rat to leave it back at the anthill nearby, Basava cautioned that there may be snakes inside. "I know that there are no snakes in this anthill. That's why I'm leaving it here," he told Basava in the Jenukuruba language and set the rat free.

As we went a little further, we saw some *Voddas* (stone breakers) breaking rocks. As we neared them, they all strangely disappeared. Basava, Kariya, Bangi, Jayakka - all of them who were with us too were gone. We searched for them everywhere - near and around the rocks but to no avail. The teacher and I were a little scared wondering where all these people had vanished to. We were jolted, when suddenly Basava scared us by shouting 'boo' from behind one of the rocks. The rest of them came out one by one from between the rocks and laughed at us saying, "We are all here!"

"Where are the *Voddas*?" I asked and they burst out laughing pointing to the direction where the *Voddas* were running away, carrying their hammers and sickles. The poor fellows mistook us for someone from the forest department and these kids too had scared them by screaming and shouting.

A couple of electric lines have also been pulled through these thin forests. Whenever we came to the forests, the kids would throw stones at the wires and Jayakka and Kariya would smile in glee as they listened to the sounds that the vibrations made. Once the stones hit the wires, the vibrating sounds stayed on for quite sometime. Throwing stones and listening to the vibrations in turns was almost a game for them.

"Ok. I'll throw stones now, you guys listen," I said to Basava and Bangi, who were throwing stones till now. I threw stones more than ten times, but the wire wouldn't shake an inch! The teacher too tried but in vain. Bangi and Kariya who had almost stuck their ears to the wires, gave us a wry smile and said, "Forget it, sir! Give it to us." They threw the stones and, at the first shot, the wires started vibrating. The teacher and I stood with our mouths open, awed by the aiming skills of these young children. The skill to aim and

shoot at any animal must have been passed down in their genes from their forefathers, I thought.

The sun looked redder and bigger as it crossed to the other hemisphere. The clouds with their silver linings took on different shapes, giving vent to the imagination of the children. One saw it as a rabbit, but Jayakka insisted that it was a deer. Basava and Bangi, on the other hand, argued that it was a rabbit as it had two long ears and a small tail. The argument in their language sounded as colourful as the different hues of the setting sun, when suddenly Bangi recognised that it was neither a deer or a rabbit but the Chikkadevamma hillock! As the sun slowly disappeared down the hills, the ears, tail and horns too faded away...

The kids were reluctant to return to the *haadi*, but as it got dark quite early these days, we had to literally pull them out from the forests. As we neared the *haadi*, a warm atmosphere greeted us. For the *Girijans*, this was a daily routine. Fires are always lit in front of their houses in fire-pits every night, during the colder months - this not only helps them warm up but also provides a lot of light.

As I prepared to leave, the kids shouted out, "Sir, come tomorrow please. We'll go to the Shiramhalli forest." As I was in a hurry to leave, I said yes without much thought and rode off on my motorbike.

## CHAPTER 2

**December 3, 1994**

### **The Creeper Flute and Colourful Tattoos**

I had promised the tribal children that I would go with them to another forest the next day. But work pressure at the office was so much that I couldn't make it. Today was a Saturday and the afternoon being free, I decided to go to the *haadi*. The very thought of roaming with the children in the forests was so exciting that I couldn't concentrate on my work all morning. I almost jumped on to my bike and zoomed off, feeling sorry for having disappointed the children yesterday. But when I reached there, the teacher gave me a 'report' on how the children had actually gone to the forest yesterday. She had accompanied them there. She seemed visibly irked and upset with the children and their behaviour. "These kids have become very naughty and unruly," she grumbled, reporting how they had actually 'plundered' the ragi fields while crossing them to reach the forest!

"I tried my best to dissuade them but they just wouldn't listen to me! They almost went on a rampage and picked up so much of the ragi... I was so embarrassed... I'm sure if the field owners had seen us, they would have thought that I had brought them there to steal the grain!" she said in one breath, revealing how upset she was. The kids wanted to have it their way, I suppose! They took these heads of grain inside the forest, made a little fire with dry twigs, burnt these slightly and relished eating them.

It's a fact that these children are always bogged down by hunger. They don't have the luxury of the usual two or three meals a day. They are lucky if they get one decent meal a day. What they get as a mid-day meal is just not sufficient for these children of the forests, who have strong appetites from all the running around they do. It is no wonder, then, that they don't miss a chance to grab something to eat at any time of the day. This 'extra' food could be anything edible, be it from the forests or from the fields. They are absolutely unfamiliar with the concept that the forest, the lands or the fields can be 'owned' by somebody. For them, all this has universal ownership. Their parents roamed around freely here and any forest produce was their food and no one ever questioned them. To these souls, 'land' is a universal element like air, light and the sky. How can anyone make these elements their own? Isn't it free to all? It was unimaginable that anyone could stake claim to these things. They only knew that it was there for them to use. This is the kind of unadulterated reality that these *Girijan* children live in.

Things have changed a lot now... The forests are slowly changing to plains, plains to small villages and fields, literally displacing the *Girijans*. It took me quite sometime to convince the teacher with this explanation and justify why the children don't feel it is wrong to take something from somebody's field. "Of course, if the field owners had seen them do this, you too would have been pulled up along with them," I added jovially.

Children aged between 5 and 6 months are admitted to the *Shishuvihar Kendras*. Fedan-Vikas runs seven such Centres and it is compulsory for all the teachers of these Kendras to reside in the respective *haadis*. The teacher of this *haadi* shared her woes with me as I too work in the same organisation.

These *Shishuvihars* are not like our normal schools. Once attendance is taken at around 9 a.m. everyday, there's not a single soul in the classroom! It's suffocating for them to sit amidst four walls and learn something. They find it claustrophobic... But the organisation insists that the children remain inside the Kendra till food is served to them at around 1 p.m. So it's almost like a cat and mouse game between the teacher and the children. It's so difficult to pull kids who are roaming around the *haadi* back to the classroom

and, even if she manages to bring them all in, they sulk and sulk and sit very uncomfortably. This was the teacher's main woe!

While we were discussing all this, Kencha came in with the *ada donne* and others followed suit. As decided earlier, we went to explore the Shiramhalli forests.

This was a very dense forest earlier and was home to quite a few wild animals like elephants, tigers and leopards. But now it's like someone shaved off the forests! In place of the forests, you only find miles of barren and cultivated lands. The *Girijans* don't own any land though. The little that is left of the forests is owned by the forest department.

As we entered the forests, Kencha picked up a shoot and started blowing it like a whistle. The other kids too made a whistle from the end of this shoot. It was only then that I realised that you can make a whistle from the *Ugani Hambu* creeper that grows all over the fence. Jayakka brought a shoot and explained how to make a whistle.

This is how it is made. You pinch off the tapering end of the *hambu*. About 4 inches from there, you make a circular cut using your nails. Now, when you hold the *hambu* in your hand and pull the outer layer, the thread attached to the *hambu* remains there and the 4-inch-long outer layer of the *Ugani Hambu* comes up. Now you have the 4-inch-long whistle, ready to blow! When you keep the end of the whistle in your mouth and blow air into it, you get a 'pee' sound, just like the sound that emanates from a Shehanai. All the kids now had a whistle with them and started blowing away with gay abandon. It sounded as if a huge swarm of bees were buzzing away. These children sure know how to use the toys they make for themselves in different ways. They closed the end of the whistles and opened them at regular intervals to produce different sounds. You vary the time of the opening and closing and the sounds change! When making sounds excited them so much, would they spare a chance to play tricks on someone? Kenchi slowly crept up to Bangi and blew the whistle in his ears.

'Peel!' went the shrill sound and Bangi was literally shaking his ears with his fingers, jolted by the vibrations. He ran after her, but she proved too quick

## 10 Playing with the children of the forest

for him and escaped. Seething in frustration, he found another easy target - the teacher who was tired of all the walking and was resting under a tree. He shocked the life out of her when he went stealthily near her and blew the whistle so loudly! Already tired and sapped, she went red with anger, as she caught him and whacked him lightly.

The *Ugani Hambu* is very useful for farmers. They use it to tie haystacks and firewood stacks that they have to carry.

The speciality of this plant is that it entwines itself like a green wire with the fence throughout the year. When all the other creepers on the fence shed their leaves in the months of January and February, this plant blooms with small bell-shaped flowers all over itself. When all the other plants dry up and are almost bare, this creeper has thousands of flowers blooming on it, attracting bees and other insects. This is a medicinal plant too. The *Girijans* use the juice of these creepers to cure amoebiasis. Its leaves are smeared with oil and heated up and stuck on the boils to relieve pain and to help melt them down.

Just as the fiasco with the whistle was on, Basava climbed up some tree, broke some of its small branches and brought them down. The branches had a lot of sap in them and he ran their stems across his hands, smearing the sap all over. I was curiously watching his next move... Somebody had burnt some sweet potato nearby and the ash was still there. He gathered the ash and spread it over the sap on his hands and gently scrubbed it and dusted the powder off. Wow! All those lines he had drawn on his hands looked like green-coloured tattoos!

All of us ran to get the milk seeping from the small shoots, branches and leaves of this tree and started drawing designs on our hands. Kenchi stretched her hands out to me and eagerly said, "Please write my name on my hand, Saa!" That was enough to make everyone want to get their names autographed on their hands. In the process, they also learnt how to write their names. These children are not very familiar with alphabets and this was an exciting exercise, which not only taught them to write their names but also made it look so colourful! Some kids drew pictures of the sun and moon.

This tree, which secretes a milk-like sap, is called *Haale Mara* (Milk Tree). There are several such trees in the forest. The whitish sap oozes from the branches, leaves and shoots of this tree. Bunches of white flowers in full bloom cover the whole tree, making it look like one big blossomed flower.

The milk from this tree is also used for relief from toothache. The 3/4<sup>th</sup>-of-an-inch long pods, hanging from the trees, stick to each other like a bow and it looks as if a number of small bows are suspended from the tree.

The children love to clamber up these *Haale* trees and pluck the pods. The roots of this tree are crushed, mixed with water and consumed to kill worms. This is a very soft tree and wooden combs are made from it. The churners used for churning butter from curds are also made from these trees, as the wood of this tree has the capacity to retain the stickiness of the butter. A long comb with very fine teeth, used to pull out nits of head lice, is another popular product of this tree.

The kids wouldn't come down the *Haale* tree. I had to divert them by showing them the wood apple tree by the roadside and said we would pluck some wood apples. They all clambered down and both Kencha and Basava climbed the huge wood apple tree as easily as they would walk on the road. These kids were natural tree-climbers! They had hardly plucked 4 or 5 apples when the person working in the nearby field came shouting... Who the hell has climbed the tree? The kids, scared out of their skin, quickly started climbing down, but I told them not to. The tree was by the roadside and didn't belong to anybody, I assured them, and encouraged the children to continue plucking the fruit. I explained to the man that he does not have the sole right to the tree.

It is sad that most owners of these fields look down upon the *Girijans*. Even when they are just walking across the fields, those working there shoo them off. This kind of harsh treatment has led them to come together and organise themselves into a Tribal Association to fight for their rights and self-respect. So now, they don't care if the workers shoo them away. They just walk past the fields harmlessly.



## 12 Playing with the children of the forest

*Girijans* roam around the forests only to dig out roots and tubers, to catch rats and collect honey. So they pose absolutely no harm to the fields or its owners. In fact, they are benefited as they get rid of the rats that destroy their fields at no extra cost. They fear that the *Girijans* may steal something from their fields. As I was explaining how harmless these people are to the man in the fields, I could hear some banging sounds! The teacher and Bangi were busy throwing the wood apples at each other simultaneously, trying to smash two apples together and each time they succeeded, you could hear the bang sound.

The teacher looked aside to see where I had disappeared, when the apple thrown by Bangi hit her bang on the cheek. She writhed in pain and rubbed it vigorously even as her cheek went red and swelled up. I felt sorry for her and tried to divert her attention from the pain by saying, "Oh God! Are you so red with anger because I was late?"

The children too stopped playing, crushed the apple and gave a large portion of it to the teacher, as if to butter her up! But the teacher was not easily pacified as she walked away saying, "I don't want anything. You people eat everything."

We all quietly and silently followed the teacher who marched towards the *haadi* still fuming...We had walked just a little when we noticed some movement in the shrubs nearby. The children who suspected a wild boar to be there, stopped the teacher, pointing towards the danger ahead. I shuddered at the thought of a wild boar being in there! The chilling incident of Chikkaiah of Kebbepura Haadi who shared his boar-hunting expedition with me flashed across my mind...

Once Kenchaiyah and Chikkaiah went to the forests to hunt for a wild boar, well equipped with all their weapons. Kenchaiyah was in full spirits, boasting about his hunting skills and how he had shot down a wild boar before... He flashed his weapon around and said he would kill a boar with just one stroke... Usually a group of 7 or 8 people go to hunt for a wild boar. But that day, there were only two of them and this had Chikkaiah a little worried.

As they walked on, they could hear some noise from the shrub nearby. Kenchaiah's valour took the better of him and he whispered to Chikkaiah to stand behind a tree while he 'finished' off the boar. Chikkaiah stood behind a tree and was shocked to see Kenchaiah come flying across the shrub. Even as he stood there with his mouth wide open, he heard Kenchaiah fall with a thud to the ground. Shocked, Chikkaiah slowly moved towards him to see a huge piece of flesh, the size of one's palm torn from Kenchaiah's thigh. He lay there shivering in fright and pain!

Chikkaiah now understood what must have happened...A boar with huge teeth had got between Kenchaiah's legs and flung him across. The sharp teeth had cut across the skin of his thighs... If you thought only a qualified plastic surgeon could re-fix torn parts of your body, read this! Chikkaiah who knew a little of the *Girijan* system of medicine, had the presence of mind to quickly search for the torn piece of flesh. He was lucky to find it! He rushed back and put the piece back in place, put the juice of some plant nearby, tore off a piece from Kenchaiah's torn clothes and wrapped it tightly around the wound. With a lot of effort, he put Kenchaiah on his back like he would carry a sack and was out of breath by the time he reached the *haadi*. It just took a week for the wound to heal and when the bandage was removed, the flesh was fixed to the thigh as before, is what Chikkaiah told me.

The memory of this incident sent shivers down my spine, wondering what could happen if there was a wild boar in the shrub. But, to our relief, it was little Gowri who hopped out of the bush with a loud 'hai.' Gowri, who had seen us coming from a distance, said she hid in the bushes to scare us. Though a little angry at her prank, we sighed a huge sigh of relief and the teacher who had by now forgotten her swollen cheeks laughed with us, as we reached the *haadi* safely.

## CHAPTER 3

December 17, 1994

### Mischief of the Pundana termite, The Lion Ant

The teacher at Navile Haadi had gone on leave to celebrate the *Huthri* festival. In her absence, someone had broken the latch of the *Shishuvihar* and the door could not be locked. If the door of the *Shishuvihar* is not locked, dogs can get in and dirty the place, complained the *Yajman* (Head Man), Ningaiah. People of the *haadi* and the neighbouring village would gather inside and play cards all night, he added.

I bought a latch from the handpost and went to the *haadi* to set the door right. On the way, I met Ningaiah's mother-in-law, Kempamma, who cursed the people of the *haadi* and the entire village, using the choicest of below-the-belt abuses. Her anger was not just directed at the people but also her son-in-law. "If the owner is good and right in his ways, all this will never happen. He drinks and plays cards and creates nuisance, so why blame the people," she fumed. I was confused! Then why would Ningaiah himself complain to me and request me to bring a new latch for the door? I reached the *haadi*, trying to find answers to my question.

Kempamma had contested as a member and won the recently held *Gram Panchayat* elections. Though she was a *Gram Panchayat* member, it was always Ningaiah who had the last word. In the *haadi* system, the head

or the *Yajman* plays a pivotal role. All celebrations, festivals, ceremonies and important decisions are taken in his presence. Nobody could question his decision. It's probably because of such a stringent social system that the *Girijans* have been able to secure their social norms and values. If there are any misunderstandings, the issues are resolved at the *Nyaya Panchayat* through the active participation of the people. Nobody is above the decisions taken at such *Panchayat*.

I assumed Kempamma's allegations were the outcome of some kind of envy at being denied of the power she actually was entitled to! It's the usual practice for the kids to jump on to my Rajdoot motorcycle even before I could switch off the ignition. Gudda would jump on the pillion while Kariya and Jayakka would take turns pressing the horn. But, surprisingly, no one was in sight today and, as I looked around, I saw all of them huddled together and involved in what seemed to be a very important task. I was curious again! What better work did they have than getting the latch of the *Shishuvihar* repaired? Had they caught a prized bird and begun playing with it? I went near to see what was happening.

I peeped in through the crowd but found no bird. Everyone was staring at an inch-wide mud mound. I understood nothing, but joined them in staring at the mound. Jayakka and Kencha who were sitting beside me were searching for something and picked a minute thing in between their forefinger and thumb and dropped it into the small pit-like space on the mound. I observed that what they had brought was a small black ant. Jayakka put a red ant into another pit. Both the ants tried to come up but in vain. The more they climbed up, the more they slipped through the fine sand and went down again! Suddenly, I saw two tong-shaped creatures pop out of the mound, spilling mud all over, and very quickly pull the ants in. Gudda was trying to spill mud and take out these tong-like creatures from another mound.

*Yajman* Ningaiah didn't seem to be interested in this mud and sand business. He urged me to set the latch right. I fended him off, asking him to first remove the old latch, and assured him I'll be right there. I went towards Gudda wondering what insect he had scooped up.

Gudda had picked up an insect the size of a bean. He kept it on his small left palm and continued swirling his right fore-finger around the insect. He sounded like a bus conductor, as kept asking the little insect, "Where is Anthara Sante? Where is Sargur? Where is Kote?" (all names of villages nearby) and the insect wriggled back and forth as if to show in which direction these places were. Jayakka, Kempa and Bangi, too, had an insect on each of their palms and were asking for directions.

I must admit that I was more interested in this 'insect game' than the kids were! I pushed a little mud from the mound nearby and picked up an insect and put it on my palm. I was taken aback because the insect lay still and looked dead! Oof! I must have killed it with my nails when I was taking it out from the mud, I thought, and very disappointed, tried putting it down when little Gowri shouted "Saa... it is not dead! Whirl your fingers around it and ask where is Mangalore or Bombay is and it will show you the direction!" Rather surprised at how she knew the names of these cities, I twirled my finger around the insect. The insect seemed activated, jumped, and wriggled and showed me the directions!

Poverty is so prevalent amongst the *Girijans*, that they send away their children to work in households in far off cities rather than letting them live in the *haadis* and die of starvation. There are a few brokers in the neighbouring village who make a deal with the employers and the parents of these children and take them away. If they are lucky, they are treated well by their employers. But most of the times they are treated very badly and subjected to a lot of violence. Sometimes the girls are packed off to cities like Bombay and forced into prostitution.

There are more than a hundred such cases, where children have been sent away for domestic work. When some NGOs and the media have tried to draw the attention of the government towards this critical situation, some children have been brought back with the help of the police. But the parents send the children back as they have no alternate source of livelihood.

Gowri's sister, Shivamma, was sent to Mangalore from this *haadi* itself. She was looked after well by her employer. Shivamma can now speak Konkani

fluently. She now speaks only in Mangalore Kannada and has almost forgotten the Jenukuruba language.

However, Shivamma, who was sent back from Mangalore, came along with her set of midis, frocks and chudidars. With no other clothes to wear, Shivamma is forced to wear these modern dresses and gets curious, and sometimes disdainful, looks from her people. The irony is that Shivamma wears good dresses but is starving most of the time.

I realised that Gowri knew the names of cities because of her sister and returned to my game with the insect.

Ningaiah was sticking to me like a leech! Since he was behind me to repair the latch, I went to the *Shishuvihar* along with my insect. Before I could replace the latch, I showed him the insect and asked which insect it was.

"Oh! This is the *Pundana* insect, Sir," he drawled. "You can find it in dilapidated buildings and places where there is fine sand. These feed on ants and, just like the spider weaves its web, this insect burrows itself in the mud and makes a small pit which the ants fall into. Once the ants fall in, they jump up and pull them down. The ants can't escape because every time it tries to climb up one step, it slips back two steps!"

Ants and insects can probably make a getaway from the spider's web, but it's impossible to come out from the clutches of this *Pundana hulu*. Smooth to touch, this little insect is a clever creature. It pretends to be dead once it is pulled out of the mud; But with a little movement, it grabs the ants with its tongs and gobbles them up.

At times, a strong breeze can blow away the mounds along with the insects. When the insects are in the open, lying still, the ignorant ants swarm around it, assuming it is dead. But the cunning insect shakes itself up and devours the ants. All this precious information came from Ningaiah's book of experience. I securely fixed the latch of the *Shishuvihar* door, pondering over how the worm was rightly named *Pundana hulu* (naughty insect).

I looked at Ningaiah and asked him why he insisted I repair the latch, when he himself played cards in here. He looked at me and replied in a matter-of-fact manner, "Yes Sir... We do play during some bad times. But I am the *Yajman* of this *haadi* and I need to set things right."

When I was working at the latch, Kempamma provided me with the nail and a stone to hammer it in. The previously furious Kempamma, nodded in agreement to Ningaiah's statement and justified his actions saying, "Sometimes it happens like this!"

There are so many attitudes and views involved in the different changes in their extremely complex lives... We need to understand this. It is wrong to be judgmental by measuring their lives and tribulations with the scale we have set for ourselves.

As I rode back home, I kept reflecting on what happened today. I realised it was wrong to come to a definite conclusion on things and people. Our job is to only observe them as mere spectators and not to be judgmental or draw conclusions.

## CHAPTER 4

June 25, 1994

### Hunt for the Squirrel

When I visited the Navile Haadi early morning today, a group of 8 to 10 people were all set to go to work. They carried their inseparable tools, the *ada donne* and *kadakatthi* (sickle to cut branches). For these people, it is a new life everyday and it is definitely a struggle for survival. I decided to join them and we walked towards the forests.

All of us were walking along the road, when suddenly a few of them cut across to the side path. *Yajman* Ningaiah warned them not to walk on the crops in the fields.

Regular roads are rarely used by these people. They have found their own paths to reach their destination. They know their path is much shorter. What would have taken us 20 minutes to reach by road, took us only 10 minutes by this route! As we walked in a line towards the Navilooru lake, I saw Sannaswamy shake a creeper near a fence and look at something under it. Naayi Mani, the dog, ran behind him and kept sniffing around. *Naayi* in the local language means dog. Naayi Mani was named after the puppy got very close to Nagamani, Chandra's daughter! So the little puppy took on the name of its owner. (Earlier the puppy was called Kempa too. *Kempu* means red) Poor Nagamani! She was often ragged and called Naayi Mani... Sannaswamy



who was busy digging under the creeper shouted out, "Oh! There's so much of thorny creeper here!" He was digging at the bottom of the fence with his *ada donne*. Ningaiah also joined him, digging at the bottom of another creeper.

This thorny creeper grows along with several other creepers on the fence. These creepers that bear the wild tubers never escape the keen vision of these tribals. I asked Basava how they could so easily locate the creeper which was almost hidden and entangled with so many other creepers. Basava like a seasoned botanist said, "Look at the shoot of this creeper.. its leaves are heart-shaped. The creeper also has thorns and the fruits are as big as a double bean. We can spot it easily." He was able to find a huge chunk of tuberous root. He pulled it out and put the end of the creeper back into the ground.

I was surprised that such a huge tuber could grow on such a thin creeper. Basava threw some more light on how to dig it out. "The soil near the fence was loose and a little moist, so it was easy to dig out the tuber. If the soil wasn't loose, the tuber would break before I pulled it out."

I observed the place where Ningaiah was digging. He had dug almost a foot down, but no tuber was in sight. He scooped up some more mud and we saw a big tuber. He slowly dug out the mud from around the tuber, taking care not to let the *ada donne* touch it. Unluckily for him, the *ada donne* fell back completely into the pit. God! I realised how much effort it takes to dig out a single tuber.

We put the tubers in a bag and continued our journey. We crossed the village tank and took another short cut. Sannaswamy pointed towards the *Chujjala* tree (Siris tree) on the banks of the field. Nagamani, Kencha and Basava quickly picked up some stones and I realised that they were eyeing a squirrel on the tree. I assumed these kids would stone the tree and bring the squirrel down. But they didn't! Instead they stuffed stones inside the mouth of the ant hill and closed the burrows on the tree's branches.

Ningaiah picked up some sticks from the fence and gave everyone a stick, and they all stood around the tree, sticks in hand.

Sannaswamy climbed up the tree and shook the branch on which the squirrel was perched, but it hopped on to another branch. It dodged Sannaswamy, jumping from one branch to another, till it had jumped on to a lone branch, from where it couldn't jump further. That's when Sannaswamy knew he had his catch and shook the branch vigorously.

The squirrel fell to the ground and the soldiers, who were standing down, surrounded the squirrel and started hitting it with their sticks. But the agile Naayi Mani jumped in, caught the squirrel by the neck and ran into the bush nearby. Basava ran behind the dog, threw a stone at it and managed to pull the squirrel out from its mouth. The dog's teeth had dug so deep into the squirrel's throat that it had died. The dead squirrel was shoved into the bag containing the tubers.

It was noon and the sun was at its peak. I had skipped breakfast and my stomach was crying to be filled. The heat had sapped my energy too! But the kids seemed absolutely unaffected by the heat or the distance. They looked as active as they were when we set out in the morning. But what actually had me more tired was the way they had killed the squirrel. I was disturbed.

The squirrel is called *Halli Kuncha* here. *Kuncha* means a paint brush and the squirrel's tail resembles one, hence the name. The tail is just thin as a thread. But the bushy fur attached to it makes it look like a thick paint brush and is almost as big as its body. The screech of the squirrel is like a bird's. When this squirrel scampers on the roof top of the houses, making a '*jeeyum jeeyum*' sound, it sounds very similar to the chirping of a bird.

I was reminded of the time I spent playing with squirrels back home. The huge tree in front of my house is covered with yellow flowers. For Sudha who used to come to our house, Baby and Manju - my neighbours - and me, it was a competition every time the squirrels threw the flowers down after sipping the nectar. The one who caught the flower before it touched the ground was the winner. It was real fun! We would carefully observe the squirrel's movements on the tree, spot the flower it was sucking and run under that spot with our hands eagerly stretched out to catch the flower.

The squirrel is always considered a lovable, harmless creature. I was really disturbed at the way these people had hunted it down as if it were a wild beast. Since I tried to understand these people based on my experiences, I got upset over certain issues. I knew that I couldn't escape this feeling of remorse if I did this. I decided to detach myself from my experiences and gel with them mentally in an unbiased way.

My thoughts were distracted when I saw Basava stick his ears to the opening of an ant hill near the fence and listen intently to something.

"What are you doing here?"

"I saw a small bee enter the hill. I am seeing if there's honey in there!"

He was actually 'listening' but told me he was trying to 'see' if there was a bee in there. If listening could make them see or visualise things, how sharp their sense organs were! I was amazed by their keen sense of hearing and sight! Basava went on to explain that he would hear a buzz if there's a bee hive inside. But if there's no hive and the bee has come in search of its previous settlement, then he wouldn't hear the sound. I admired their ability to detect a hive just by listening to such subtle sounds.

Basava's sense of sound told him that there was no hive there. No one questioned his conclusion and we moved on. While Basava was trying to discover a hive, Ningaiah was digging out another tuber from the ground near the fence. I went near him and scooped out some mud.

He had dug out tubers of an elbow length in size. Ningaiah told me that these tubers belonged to the *Vaale* species of tuber and its creepers had flowers that looked like long ear rings.

The *Girijans* generally grow these creepers in the front and backyards of their huts. I recalled seeing the creeper that looked like it carried hundreds of long ear rings, when I had gone to click a photo of the *Girijan* huts.

The sack that we carried was almost full by now. It was around 3 in the afternoon and it was time to eat.

We gathered round the huge jackfruit tree within Ramanahalli limits and lit a fire by burning a heap of dried leaves and twigs. The tubers were cut into 2 to 3-inch-long pieces and cooked on the fire. Sannaswamy took out the squirrel, placed its tail in the fire, burning the fur and brushed it off the skin. The squirrel now looked like a prematurely born infant! What followed was a rather unpleasant sight. He split open its stomach with his knife and pulled out the intestine. He then chopped it into 4 pieces and barbequed it on the fire! The aroma that wafted from the squirrel was so delectable; I must admit that I couldn't wait to devour it.

But they seemed to be in a dilemma to offer the meat to me. I voluntarily asked for a piece and popped the roasted meat into my mouth. I realised how tasty meat could be only when I ate this squirrel meat.

I was so enamoured by the taste and smell of the meat that I never bothered to think what could happen if I ate the squirrel which a dog had bitten! It struck me only after I had a go at the burnt and tasty tapiocas.

Oh! What if Naayi Mani had rabies and I caught it! Even as I shuddered, I realised that when the meat is burnt, all the possible bacteria and virus are completely destroyed. This is the principle these people follow too. Even when the most poisonous snake bites anyone, the first aid given is to immediately burn the flesh at the spot of the snake bite.

There is an allegation that the *Girijans* bring back the rotten carcass of a deer or monkey left behind by the tigers and eat the rotten meat. But as they completely burn the meat, poisoning doesn't occur at all. Everything becomes edible and fit to eat. And they know their science well, as this is what they've been doing since hundreds of years with no harm whatsoever!

## CHAPTER 5

**August 13, 1994**

### **The flying Beetle and the Bamboo Shoot**

**T**his time the teacher seemed very enthusiastic to go to the forest with the *Girijans*. No wonder, she was getting all the things packed with a lot of interest. As decided the previous day, 5 kilograms of ragi flour, chillies, salt, dhal and cereals with enough utensils were all neatly packed up. We had a lot of small kids with us this time and didn't want to take a chance. We thought we'd be prepared even if we don't find anything in the forests and decided to carry food.

Our destination today was Ramenahalli forests, 6 or 7 kms from Navile Haadi. This place was a dense forest before the Kabini dam was constructed some 20 years ago. Earlier, when I was listening to the experiences of the *Girijans*, I remember them mentioning Ramenahalli forest several times.

We had decided to visit the area, hoping that a little of it would still be there. We took the shortcut and were almost half-way there, when we realised Bangi was missing from the group. I was worried. I asked the others to go ahead, saying I'd go look for him. But the teacher spotted Bangi bending down near the other side of the fence and shouted out to me not to go searching for him. I knew this lad was looking out for something. Curiosity took the better of me. I went near him and looked in the direction he was intently looking.

A leaf that was entangled with the thread of a spider's web, dangling at the edge of a branch, had caught Bangi's attention. The leaf kept going round in circles every time the wind blew. When there was no wind, it circled in the opposite direction. The leaf circled continuously and it reminded me of the pin-wheel that children of the Bettakuruba tribe make with bamboo. A thread is tied to a small stick inserted into the bamboo pipe. A hole is made inside the pipe and a pin-wheel is stuck to the top of the pipe. When the thread is pulled, the pin-wheel rotates and, when the thread is released, the wheel spins in reverse at the same speed as the thread coils. The pulling and releasing of the thread makes the pin-wheel spin continuously.

I assumed the *Girijans* learnt the concept of a pin-wheel observing this kind of a spinning leaf on a spider's web. I had to literally pull Bangi out of his leaf watching spree. He was so awed by the way the leaf was spinning around that he didn't want to be disturbed. "The Ramenahalli forest has more beautiful birds and animals. We won't be able to spot them if we are late," said the teacher, tugging at him and managing to bring him away.

We assumed we would have to trek through thin forests along the path before we actually reached Ramenahalli forest. But all that we saw were stretches of cotton fields in place of forests. There was hardly any sign of other trees or plants. We reached the backwaters of the Kabini river. I hoped we would find the forests atleast now. Thankfully, we saw a thick cover of huge trees. As we entered the 'forest', we could see huge plantations of the Nilgiri, Hercules and Seeme Tangadi trees. To say we were disappointed not to spot any birds or animals or any edible tubers here would be an understatement!

The entire forest was cleared after the Kabini reservoir was built. When some land was given to farmers for cultivation, there was a danger of erosion of the top soil, so the forest department was asked to grow trees in some places in the backwater region. The species of trees that the department has planted here is not a suitable habitat for birds and animals or for other plants to grow.

Tired and disappointed at not finding any diversity here, we decided to return. Wait! There was a natural forest nearby, untouched by the forest department. We decided to trek there, but, as the children too were tired, we camped nearby and cooked ragi balls and curry with the groceries we carried.

The kids, who were highly upset at this barren land, were pecking at their food, when we saw an animal resembling a dog jump out from the bush nearby and run towards the fields. Those who were ploughing the fields ran behind it, and shouted, "Look! The fox!" and started running behind it, but it disappeared behind the bushes. The children, who were till then very despondent, suddenly looked a little cheerful after having spotted a fox. They hurriedly finished lunch and took up their sticks and nudged the bushes as they walked along, hoping a rabbit would hop out. When one of them nudged a bush with his stick, we heard a rustling sound. Assuming it to be an animal, everyone stood around with their sticks in hand, ready to attack it.

A huge cobra leisurely stretched itself out from the bushes and, on seeing us intruders, opened its hood. That was a sight indeed, which I wanted to capture with my camera for posterity. Jayakka, who was carrying my camera bag, had gone to the river with the bag to wash her hands. By the time she returned, the snake had slipped away!

While we were returning, Kencha caught an insect sitting on a branch in the bush and threw it up. "Yeh! It's the flying puppy... Catch it, catch it," the children screamed, as they ran towards the direction it flew, so that they could catch it before it fell down. This insect is called *Haaro Kunni* by the *Girijans* (It means a flying puppy). This inch-long insect, with 6 legs and 2 light and red coloured wings, is a beetle. When you catch this insect and fling it, it flies for sometime and falls to the ground. It doesn't fly for long. That's why it has become a live toy for the *Girijan* kids.

Those who succeed in catching the *kunni* before it reaches the ground get a chance to throw it again. The others run along the path it flies and position themselves at the spot where they think it's going to fall again. But the insect is a clever one. It misleads them by flying in all directions. In their

zeal to catch the *kunni*, the kids ran around getting pricked by thorns, hurting themselves. Some tripped, some slipped and some bumped into each other and fell back. Basava, who was running to catch the flying *kunni*, accidentally stepped on the teacher's toes and she let out a painful scream and caught hold of his shirt's collar. The already worn-out shirt tore apart. The teacher took out a safety pin from her chain and pinned the shirt. Basava was happy he had earned a pin. The torn shirt didn't seem to bother him at all, as he went behind the flying *kunni* again.

Puttamma went into the bamboo grove nearby and brought lots of bamboo shoots. I asked how they make curry out of these shoots, but she didn't seem to hear me. She gave the shoots to Papaiah who gently peeled the skin. He chopped the shoots into thin round slices. These shoots looked as white as milk and as tender and soft as a jasmine flower. Papaiah made a big cone out of a teak leaf, put the bamboo slices in and tied a creeper to it, to pull it along. Now Puttamma had the time to give me the recipe! "You need to put the slices in water overnight. Next morning, wash them very well, drain the water out and take out the slices. Cook this with green gram or horse gram and make curry as usual. It's real tasty," she said, smacking her lips.

I had heard stories that, if the bamboo shoots were not cooked properly, it could get stuck in the throat and you can even die! I was reluctant to use it to make curry myself.

"You have taken so much trouble to slice it. You take it with you today and make the curry. I'll take it some other day," I said, trying to sound very magnanimous!

I handed the packet to the teacher asking her to prepare the curry and she happily grabbed it. It was 7 in the evening when we reached the *haadi*.

As usual, everyone was sitting around the fire-pits waiting for us.



## CHAPTER 6

**December 11, 1994**

### **Coloured Ducks and the Leaf**

**W**inter has just set in. When I ride my bike, the cold wind penetrates deep in and sends chills down my bones. The road is completely blocked by thick fog, making it nearly invisible. Every time I try to change the gears of the motorbike, my fingers almost freeze.

The cold is so bad that, when you have a hot water bath in the early morning, it's as if somebody is pricking your finger tip with a needle! But you need the hot water to keep yourself warm.

I had to meet a friend coming from Bangalore at 10 a.m. Before meeting him, I had to go the Navilooru lake and click some photos of the coloured duck.

When I had gone to Navile Haadi yesterday, I saw Bangi holding two beautiful coloured ducks. When he placed these ducklings on the ground, they strutted around with their small webbed feet. I was amazed seeing these coloured ducks. I quickly and carefully picked them up, fearing the dog may eat them.

Naayi Mani came near me wagging his tail and looked very yearningly at the ducklings. I sensed his eagerness to devour the birds and asked Bangi to

leave the ducklings inside the house. This amused Bangi. "Our house doesn't have a door Saa. Naayi Mani will go in and eat them up. Let's leave them at Madam's house." We walked towards the teacher's house.

Lingaswamy peeped in through the half-opened door and confirmed that the teacher was at home. But she was in deep sleep. Not wanting to disturb her, we decided to wait in the verandah. Fondling the ducklings, I asked Bangi where he got them from. Another story unfolded.

His father Papaiah and mother Puttamma had gone along with Bangi to pick cotton in the fields in the neighbouring village the previous day. Kempa, Basava, and Nagamma, too, had gone to the same field with their parents to pick cotton.

The Navilooru lake lies beside the cotton field. While the parents work in the fields, these kids love to get into the water and splash around. It was another opportunity that day. They slipped into the lake and tried catching *soslu* (fingerlings), but they kept slipping off their hands. Nagamani asked for the red lotus floating nearby. When Basava went to get it for her, he saw these two coloured ducklings swimming there. He threw the lotus away and picked up the ducklings and brought them ashore. Everyone was thrilled to see these bright and colourful ducklings and took turns carrying them. They were so awed at these birds that they brought it to the *haadi* even before their parents came back from work. Bangi's narration was just over, when the teacher woke up.

She sounded apologetic and said we should have woken her up. I jokingly replied that we didn't want to deprive her of her sweet dreams.

Though sleepy-eyed, she looked appreciatively at the coloured birds and carried them as gently as she would carry an infant.

I was really thrilled to see these coloured ducklings. I believed they belonged to the rare species of pink-headed ducks. Bird watchers had observed that the number of these birds had dwindled alarmingly way back in 1878 itself. As there is a huge demand for these birds, they were easy prey

for hunters. To protect the species from extinction, an Act banning hunting of these birds was passed in 1956.

I considered myself lucky to have seen a bird of such rare species. However, I was thankful I had gone to the *haadi* yesterday. If I hadn't, these people would have probably roasted the birds for dinner. Thank God for that! I explained the importance of conserving the species and managed to convince them to leave the ducklings back in the lake.

I told them to come the next morning to the lake with the ducklings. I would bring my camera too and, after clicking a few snaps, we would send the birds back to the water. Everyone agreed and that's why I was here.

When I reached the lake, the sun seemed a little lazy to rise! As he took his time rising, the fog played curtain, hiding him from my vision.

I stood there shivering, waiting for the kids to arrive. I opened Dr. Salim Ali's book to refresh my knowledge about the species. My spirits were dampened! The duckling I saw was actually a red-combed duck, which looked similar to the pink-headed duck. This can be seen in lakes and ponds only during winter.

I tried to console myself, saying the species I saw yesterday was new to me and hence special!

The sun had cast the misty curtain aside and was getting ready to show his might. The kids hadn't turned up yet. Did I smell roasted duck? I grew suspicious and went to the *haadi* to see what had conspired.

What do I see there? All the kids were huddled in front of the teacher's house. They looked crestfallen, sitting in front of one of the ducklings that had died.

I didn't want to take any chances! I quickly got off my bike and clicked some photos of the surviving bird. Hoping to keep this bird at least alive, we picked it up and walked towards the lake.

I knew I would be delayed because of the unexpected turn of events. Chandra was going to H.D. Kote and I requested him to tell my friend that I would be late. One duckling was alive! We thought we will save at least that one and walked towards the lake.

We saw a pair of coloured ducks swimming in the lake. I slowly laid the duckling in the water. It swam hurriedly and went under the wings of its mother. It was fun to see the way these ducks went in and popped out of the water every few seconds.

We decided to walk back through the thin forests. We merrily plucked leaves and twigs and blew whistles along the way.

As I mentioned earlier, whenever I went with these *Girijans*, we rarely took a road. It was always a shorter, muddier route they made their way through, no matter if they had to cross fields or lands. I was so used to this other path; I actually enjoyed walking through the rough path. You never get to see some interesting scenes you could see here, if you walked on the roads.

As usual, the ever-exploring Kenchu was looking out for some plant. He ran to the tree and plucked out a leaf from its hollow. He tore an inch off the leaf from the thin outer covering, folded it and put it on the upper gums of his mouth. He then moved it little down, pressed it with his tongue and blew air out.

Basava, the keen listener, could hear something. "It's the sound of quail," he said excitedly, stopping us.

He moved towards the source of the sound to catch the bird. He went around the shrub to where Kenchu was and told him there was quail nearby and they could catch it. Kenchu smiled and blew air through his mouth, sounding like the bird. Fooled and disappointed, Basava tried to hit Kenchu on the back, "Idiot! It's you is it? Wait till I catch you!" Kenchu managed to escape and ran towards us. He sounded so much like the bird, when he blew again from his mouth.

Forget how Basava got fooled! The sounds made by these people are so real, the birds get fooled and come flying, only to be trapped by them.

A similar bird, Siddagalakki, is the most loved bird of the Girijans. They love catching these birds. They sing and dance about how to catch these birds, which live in a flock of 15 to 20 birds.

These birds live in the forests and near bushes in big groups. They hop from one bush to another, chirping all the way. They eat any insect, fruit of Banyan and Peepul trees, grams and the nectar of flowers.

The birds build nests in the shape of a tumbler that are usually 5 feet above the bush. Three or four eggs are laid at one time. Both the male and female birds share the responsibility of protecting the young ones. Strangely, cuckoos with combs and other cuckoos slyly lay their eggs in these nests and manage to get them brooded till the chicks come out.

The way the *Girijans* trap quail is cunning, as they mislead the birds by imitating their voice, just as Kencha did through the Thensi leaf (a highly drought resistant tree of the Indian desert).

These birds live in groups and follow the sound made by their female counterparts. This practice leads to their death. The *Girijans* trace the places where the birds flock and lay the nets very cleverly. They then imitate the sound of the female birds and the males come in droves, only to be trapped in the nets. There are different kinds of nets used here.

One is called *Gullu Bale*. They choose a place and spread grains on the net and leave, creating a safe place for the birds to come and pick it up. In the next 2 or 3 days, the birds fly in there and assure themselves that it's a safe place to pick their food. But alas! On the fourth day, the *Girijans* pull the strings of the net, trapping all the birds in together.

The *Saalu Bale* (line net) is a net with loops. The net is woven in such a way that when the birds come to feed on the grains, their heads get trapped in the net. Though they lay these nets, when the birds don't come, the *Girijans* trap flocks of birds by imitating their voice!

I asked Kencha to pluck some leaves for me too, which he gladly did. He rolled the leaf like they do and asked me to blow it. But when the teacher or I tried to blow it, all that came out was a faint hiss sound. We realised we could do this only with a lot of practice and stopped trying.

Basava was furiously smashing the trunk of a tree with a stone. Assuming he was trying to take out his anger on Kencha, I tried consoling him, asking him why he should hurt a tree. Basava gave me one of those 'you-will-never-understand' looks. "No Saa... you get wax if you hit the trunk and make a dent here," he replied! This is called the *Dindalu* tree (Axlewood ). There were several of them here earlier. The tree makes good firewood and fire from this wood provides a lot of warmth and heat. The villagers have chopped off almost all the *Dindalu* trees around.

But the tree slowly sprouts only to be chopped off again! That's why you have only the stumps of the trees left now.

Earlier, the *Girijans* extracted red and white gum from the *Dindalu* trees and sold it. This is edible gum and is used for making several sweetmeats. There is a huge demand for the gum of this tree. The *Girijans* sell it at Rs 10 per kg to the Lamp Society. But if you want to buy it from a shop, you have to shell out Rs 60-80 per kg.

They used to collect a minimum of one kg from each tree! These trees which were thousands in numbers were the major source of income for the *Girijans*. But their numbers have dwindled alarmingly.

## CHAPTER 7

**December 20, 1994**

### **Wooden dolls that breathe and mushrooms that turn into bombs**

There was a message waiting for me when I reached the office this morning. Venkat Shetty told me that I had a visitor from Bangalore who would be back to meet me after breakfast. I wondered who the person was, but got back to transcribing the cassettes that contained the stories of the Bettakuruba tribes.

The visitor was back. I switched off my tape recorder to check out and was pleasantly surprised to see Laila. She was working with the Peepul Tree organisation in Bangalore and I had met her when she was here to be with the *Girijans* as part of her studies on the *Girijan* legal system. I greeted Laila and looked at another lady who was with her.

"She's Sunitha, my friend. We studied together in college. She hails from Vishakapatnam. She is passionate about birds," Laila said, introducing me to her. I acknowledged and we got into casual conversation.

Laila was very enthusiastic about trekking in forests. Not wanting to disappoint her, I asked her to suggest a place and she was quick to say Navile Haadi as it was the nearest place.

### 38 Playing with the children of the forest

My Rajdoot bike felt as proud as I did to chauffeur two ladies and we drove towards the *haadi*. The children and elders, who were taken by surprise at this unexpected visit, were quick to surround us and enquire if everything was ok.

The teacher, who assumed the women were supervisors on a visit to the *Shishuvihar Kendra*, hurriedly collected record books, tucked them under her arm and walked towards us.

It was already one in the afternoon and we asked the teacher to serve lunch to the kids and went inside the *Kendra* to have a look at the toys. Apart from the printed charts hung on the walls, charts with the drawings of Ginia, Chandru and Kariya – young men from the *haadi* -also had their space on the walls.

The teacher had finished serving food. She came back, pulled out a few wooden dolls hung on to the roof and showed them to us saying they were made by Kenchaiah.

The unique thing about these dolls was that they didn't have the conventional body parts like eyes, ears, or nose. It looked like as if someone had shaped his emotions into dolls. Another unique feature was, every time you turned the doll in a different direction, it assumed a different shape. A single doll looked like an old woman, a labourer, hunter, tuber - everything in one.

Giving a definite shape and form to a piece of wood and limiting it to just to one image is normal. What struck us about these dolls was the creator's ability to bring out different forms in one doll so creatively.

Sunitha was very curious to know more about Kenchaiah who had made these dolls. The teacher pointed to a frail-looking man sitting in front of a dilapidated hut with his knees folded. Kenchaiah was trying to soak in the sunlight and didn't seem very interested about our presence. Kenchaiah must be over 50 years old now. Before he came here 5 years ago, he lived in the Sunkadakatte forests. For the most part of his life, that is for about 45 years,



he has been amidst the flora and fauna of Sunkadakatte in the dense forests of Kakanakote.

As we spoke to him about his life in the forest, he shared his unique, at times rather chilling experiences, one by one so vividly, that we felt it all happened before our eyes!

We listened in rapt attention as he unfolded his tryst with the forests... how he got into the almost impregnable dense forest and felled a mammoth sandalwood tree on the request of the Maharaja and how while doing so was attacked by a bear... how the flesh of his ankle was torn off trying to ward off the animal and how he himself prepared the medication for the deep wound... As Kenchaiah went on, he gave us an insight into the lifestyle of the *Girijans* who lived in the forests earlier. Every small anecdote, every incident that he shared, gave us a better understanding of the travails of these people who dwell in the forests.

When we asked him how he took up the hobby of making dolls, he quipped rather casually, "The children always cried, as they were always hungry! I started carving these dolls from the wooden logs and gave it to them to divert their attention."

We were astonished to see how any piece of wood that came into Kenchaiah's hand turned into a toy for the *Girijan* kids! The dolls that he carves bear the stamp of his varied experiences of living in the forests, which is why we felt the dolls were the medium through which he tried to connect the children to the bygone days in the forests.

Life has not been easy after Kenchaiah came out of the forests. Unable to move because of acute pain in the knees, unable to earn, he simply sits around and passes his time.

The teacher, who has come to this *haadi*, recognized Kenchaiah's skills and has been kind enough to give him also some food, when the children get their daily food. This is his only life support now. The teacher served us what she had cooked and we too shared the bread, jam and fruits that we

had carried with us. The children had already gathered there to roam around in the thin forest area.

Jayakka was stuck to us from the time we had arrived here and was hovering around us without even having lunch. We gave her an apple and proceeded. We crossed the forests and entered a plain land. We were jolted by a loud sound behind us even as yellow smoke engulfed us. Scared, we looked back to see Kaala laughing loudly. He had a round object in his left hand. As we tried to see what it was, Basava dropped it on the feet of the teacher who was coming behind us. She winced in pain and cursed them profusely.

We took the object very apprehensively from Kaala's hand, only to see that it was just a round mushroom. As we looked around, we saw many such mushrooms that had sprouted on the ground. The outer skin had peeled off and the mushrooms had developed cracks.

As it was winter, the mushrooms are soaked in dew all night. In the morning, they develop cracks as they get heated in the sun. All the contents inside are dried up and turn into yellow powder. When you throw this mushroom to the ground, it makes a 'dub' explosive sound and the yellow powder that is released mixes with air making it look like yellow smoke. Yet another natural toy for the children. They picked up handfuls of them, throwing these little bombs to the ground.

The teacher limped behind us. Jayakka, literally the teacher's tail, walked behind her, imitating the teacher's limp. Laila was sympathetic and looked to see what happened. The area below the toes had turned red.

Sunitha plucked a few leaves from the eucalyptus tree nearby, crushed them with a stone and rubbed it on the affected area. She gently massaged the area, as I spoke to Laila about the depth of knowledge about mushrooms these *Girijans* had.

According to the statistics I have collected, the people are aware of 43 species of edible mushrooms. During the mushroom season, it becomes their

staple diet. They locate the areas where the mushrooms grow, much before the onset of the season.

Generally, the mushrooms sprout again in the same place they had previously grown. The people are well aware about which species of mushroom grows in which weather condition and during which days. This makes it so much easier for them to collect the mushrooms.

For the kids, mushrooms are nothing short of special eatables. When it's brought home, the hungry kids chomp away at the raw mushrooms with relish. I never knew you could eat mushrooms raw.

Once a group of 4 or 5 *Girijan* children, 3 elders and four of us from the organisation went to attend the 'Ainora Marigudi Jaatre,' which is a fair conducted deep inside the forest. We had to cross the dense Kalkere forest, to reach the place of the fair around 20 kms away. It was already past noon when we left. Maada warned us that we had to reach the fair by 2 p.m., otherwise it would be late for us to return in the evening and there was elephant menace in this forest. He not only warned us, but forced us to run through the forests.

After 4-5 monsoon showers the lush grass had grown all over and was a hindrance for us to walk or run. Not used to this kind of an 'adventure run,' we ran out of steam half way through. Hunger increased our tiredness. A couple of lone tuskers that we spotted on the way took away all the joys of enjoying the beauty of the forests. We were really scared. But the *Girijan* kids seemed undeterred as they scampered on gleefully.

The children had collected something in their shirts and were busy eating them. Their tasty dish was the white mushrooms. I had seen white mushrooms earlier, but didn't know it could be eaten and that too raw. When I expressed my doubt, they gave me a piece to taste and said it was absolutely safe. I put a small piece into my mouth but the raw smell was nauseating, though extremely hungry, we didn't have the skill to satiate our hunger eating the rather repulsive raw mushrooms.

These people are well aware of edible and inedible mushroom. They call the inedible ones 'mad mushrooms.' If a person happens to eat them, the stomach bloats and the person dies. Some even go mad. These legends have led them to name the mushrooms thus but we aren't as skilled as they are to differentiate between the bad and the good. It's safer to stick to the 2-3 species we know about, I told Laila, who was listening intently to whatever I was saying. We looked back to see the teacher and Sunitha walking slowly behind us, engaged in some conversation.

The children had gathered around a *kakke* bush (Golden Shower tree) and were busy with some game.

I was surprised to see Sunitha and teacher conversing so much as Sunitha did not know Kannada, the language the teacher spoke and the teacher didn't understand English or Telugu that Sunitha spoke.

I was curious to know their medium of conversation. Sunitha was speaking in Telugu. The teacher understood it in her way and replied in Kannada. Sunitha seemed to understand and again continued in Telugu. Language didn't seem a communication barrier for these good friends.

We approached the kids near the *kakke* bush. A green-coloured beetle which glistened in the light was the kid's toy this time. A thread was tied around the neck of the beetle and it was tied this to a folded *kakke* leaf. A twig was inserted through the middle of the leaf.

When the stick was held in both hands and the beetle was lowered, it went round the twig making a buzzing sound. The kids love playing with this live pin-wheel that also glistens in the light.

They preserve this beetle in an empty match box and feed it with *kakke* leaves. The kids excitedly told us that the beetle lays white eggs.

Whenever I see this beetle, I'm reminded of what Annur Kaliah told me about black magic and mesmerism. According to him, when you want to attract the girl you love towards you, they use the beetle along with the leaves of two different trees.

The beetle is burnt on coal to obtain the ash. The leaves are also burnt. The ashes of both the insect and leaves are mixed with linseed oil brought from a Harijan's house. This balm should be applied to the hair of the girl you want to make your own. Before using it on the girl, one needs to test it on a female calf. If it's a male you are batting for, then test it on a young ox. If the calf follows the person who applied the balm, then it is good to use it on humans too. When I narrated this to Laila , Sunitha, and the teacher, they looked mesmerised!

They were curious to know the leaves of which tree were used for this. I jokingly asked who they wanted to mesmerise and quickly changed the topic, as we walked back to the *haadi*.

## CHAPTER 8

**August 10, 1994**

### **Tangy Gooseberries that leave a sweet taste**

I left around 11 in the morning to meet Rajanna who lives in Manchegowdana Haadi. Around 30,000 plants have been planted in the 40 acre land in the *haadi*, under the watershed programme. The plants on either side of the road here grow into big trees in a span of two years and add to the greenery around. The people of the *haadi* nurture the plants with so much care that this dry land has turned into a veritable green land. To protect cattle and sheep from grazing on these plants, they have put up a green live fence around the 40 acre plot and have taken up mass cultivation.

The credit for making the watershed project a success should truly go to Rajanna. He has good knowledge of wild trees and plants and his love for nature and greenery has driven him to take keen interest in this project. It's a pleasure talking to Rajanna, who very interestingly articulates his life in the forests and his hunting expeditions.

I couldn't meet him this time as he had gone out on some work. On my way back, I met the teacher of Laxmipura School who seemed quiet upset with the attendance at the school.

"Nine children have enrolled themselves for 1st standard this year from Navile Haadi. But not a single child comes to the school regularly. If this

continues, they will not be entitled to the money from the Jenukuruba office," she complained and requested me to talk to their parents. "Please talk to the people in the *haadi* and convince them to send the children to school. They don't heed my pleas at all! They may listen to you."

On enquiry, I came to know that the children were not given anything to eat in the afternoons. The teacher too was unhappy about this.

I tried to find a solution to the problem even as I reflected on this system of education, where we lock hungry kids in a room and try to educate them. These children of the forests are like free birds, enjoying their freedom. How would their future be, if it becomes inevitable to cage them in the name of education?

I was rather pensive with these thoughts, when I entered Navile Haadi. I asked the parents if they had sent their children to the Laxmipura school to which they replied that the children had left early in the morning. "Did they eat something before they left?" I asked with concern, but the parents didn't seem bothered. "Nothing! They'll eat something on the way." I wondered what they would find on the way to eat.

The teacher, who came in, seemed pleased she had sent the children to school, "I insisted no kids should be in the *haadi* and everyone should be in school," she said, and went to serve food for the *Shishuvihar* children as it was already 1 p.m.

The children, who were provided food regularly here a few months ago, were now packed off to a school where they had to go hungry till the afternoon. What could their plight be? I had no answer. I consoled myself saying the children will find a way out.

After the children had lunch, the teacher asked me to come along with her to find where the children had gone and what they were doing. We started walking towards the school.

There's a small trench on the way to the school which gets filled with water during rainy days. Along the trench are several wild trees and a few thick bushes.

As we neared the trench, we saw smoke coming out of it! When we went further, we saw the children roasting unripe ragi grains on a fire they had made, Basava had stretched out his faded shirt while Ningaswamy was rubbing the ragi *there* with his palms and taking the grains out.

The children were very glad to see me but held back when they saw the teacher with me. I looked at the teacher who was about to start her tirade against the kids and said, "Please don't scold them! We need to understand them and their lives in a better way."

She remained silent but couldn't contain herself for long. "You have spoilt them rotten. It is because of you that the kids are not serious about school and always roaming the forests." She sneered at me! I ignored her and observed the roasted ragi. The teacher went red with anger at the way I had ignored her and I could see her seething with rage. All of us happily ate the roasted ragi, but she refused to eat.

Though the trench was filled with water, there was dry sand on the bank, where these kids had lit up a fire to roast the ragi. Sparkling clean water flowing in the trench and the cool shade of the tree with the sand... It was an exhilarating environment. Tired of walking in the sun, I was relieved to rest for sometime here. As I relaxed, chatting with them, Kencha brought a handful of ragi *there* and started roasting them on the fire.

"From where did you get these?" the teacher asked, to which Kencha pointed towards the field nearby.

"But there's an old lady keeping watch there! How did you manage to steal?"

Kencha gave his typical 'I-am-smart' smile. "She can see me only if I stand, isn't it? I crouched and cut it off." We enjoyed the ragi, becoming a part of the daylight robbery!



The teacher, who refused to eat it initially, got the taste of it and ate a handful now. The trench was hardly knee deep, so we got into it hoping to walk through it.

Kenchu always manages to find something. He took out a few gooseberries from the water and was thrilled that there was a gooseberry tree near by. True to his expectation, there was one just nearby and he quickly climbed up and shook the branches to drop gooseberries to the ground. All of us stood below and gathered as many as we could. The gooseberries were tangy and tasty. But when we drank water after eating them, it left a sweet taste in the mouth. Suddenly we realised Gudda was missing. We went back searching for him. Gudda was atop a tree and biting into a fruit... He was on top of the *Sagade* tree.

The *Sagade* fruit is popular among the *Girijan* children. The fruit is the size of a marble. When you peel off the skin, there is a sour pulp inside. You suck the fruit and spit out the seed.

Honey bees swarm around the flowers in full bloom on this tree. The *Girijans* collect the sour pulp and it does not get spoilt, even if it is stored for months. They use it in curries and *Rasam* to add the sour flavour.

The front portion of the plough made from this wood is said to be long-lasting. The wood fibres of this wood are intricately inter-linked, keeping the wood intact.

The *Girijans* use more of this wood to make the front portions of the plough that can then be used for years. They extract oil from the *Sagade* seeds. The seeds are roasted and rubbed with the oil to get a paste. This paste is used to cure eczema. Usually eating this fruit leads to dysentery. But it does not affect the *Girijan* children, as it is their daily food. I ate some 7-8 fruits and it took me more than 2 days to recover from my bouts of dysentery. But the kids who ate 20-30 fruits remained unaffected.

Kariya sat down covering his feet with lots of mud. The other kids too followed suit. When the feet were completely covered in mud, they slowly pulled out the feet and had a neat small cave. For the children, each little

cave represented their homes. They had placed two stones inside each it, to represent their parents. Kencha placed a third stone in his cave. When I asked him who the third stone was, he replied it was for *kulli* (short person). He has a 6-year-old younger sister. Since she hadn't been named yet and was younger to him, she was called *Kulli*.

The Jenukurubas don't have the practice of naming the child. Usually a male child is called by his grandfather's name and a female child by her grandmother's name. But many a time, they are named according to some unique physical trait they possess. For example, Hotte (if he has a unique stomach), deaf, lame, short etc. Kalinga used to play with the bottle gourd when he was a two-year-old child and that's why he became Gudda. Moreover, they call people by whatever names they like! That's why a single person has different names like *Kariya*, *Chotta*, *Basava* etc.

The children were engrossed with their mud houses. Basava placed one stone outside the house and said it was his puppy. Bangi, the naughty one, stomped Kencha's house with his feet and that was enough to get them into a fight.

We had set off to find out why the children had not gone to school. We completely forgot about that and got totally involved in their pranks. The sun had already begun to set.

The children are a clever lot. They know they should reach the *haadi* almost at the same time the school closes, as it would give no room for doubt. They hurried back!

## CHAPTER 9

**February 11, 1995**

### **The Buzzing Beetle and The Whirl Wind**

**L**ingaiah was carrying Sannaswamy, whose leg was badly injured. A piece torn from an old sari was tied around the wound.

I was riding my bike. Lingiah stopped me. "I was going to get him the pension for physically handicapped. There is no bus in sight. If you are coming towards the *haadi*, it'll be of great help," he pleaded.

It was a Saturday and there was no work in the afternoon. So I asked them to get on and drove towards the *haadi*.

Earlier, when I went roaming the forests from Navile Haadi, Sannaswamy was an expert in tracing animals and birds. He would run like a rabbit, waiting to get hold of them, climbing a tree was as easy as walking on a road for him.

But sadly, what began as a small sore a year ago under his right foot, grew into a big wound and was now a festering wound. Several *Guddas* (sorcerers) had tried to heal him but to no avail. Their skills hadn't worked either. He was admitted to the nearby government hospital but Ningaiah wouldn't allow him to stay there for even 3 days. He brought him back. Flies hover around his wound and Sannaswamy is now a bag of bones.

I recalled the monsoon days when we trekked the forests. Sannaswamy clambered up a tree called *Nyaya Bela* (Justice Tree). It was a tree on which inedible wood apples grew. I wondered why he climbed the tree.

There were a lot of nodes on the tree and I assumed it was some sort of disease afflicted by the tree. When I asked Chandra about it, he replied in the negative. "No Saa! This is the *Nyaya Bela* Tree, isn't it? That's why you have these knotty nodes." He went on to explain, "Justice is always knotted. That's why this tree which has nodes as big as the wood apple is called *Nyaya Bela* tree." *Bela* is a wood apple. Some parts of the inner trunk of the tree were scrapped off. People who make liquor use this to ferment it quicker.

As it was the rainy season, we could hear the continuous buzzing of beetles. When he looked up to see what Sannaswamy was doing on the tree, we felt a sprinkle of cool water on our faces. I looked up and saw that the beetles on the top of the tree were spurting out water in drops from their bodies. Sannaswamy brought down one such beetle. How would this be a toy I wondered as I carefully observed what he would do with it. Sannaswamy held the beetle between his forefinger and thumb and pressed it. It let out a buzzing sound.

If you press the back of the beetle when it's quiet, it lets out a buzzing screech.

He gave the beetle to the other kids. All of them put their hands to their back. "Listen to the sound and tell me who has the beetle," he challenged me. I followed the sound and pointed at Kencha. But Basava had the beetle. I tried several times but could never locate where the sound came from correctly.

The buzz was in different pitches and it sounded as if the sound came from different directions. This is what fooled me. The children played this guessing game for more than half an hour.

This beetle sits on trees and makes this continuous sound only in winter. We call this the *Goballi* insect probably because it is seen more on the *Goballi* trees (Gum arabic tree, babul, or prickly acacia). The Girijans call it *Bisuvaare* because it's seen only during the time of the *Visu* (New year) festival in Kerala.

*Visu* has changed into *Bisu*. *Vaare* in the Jenukuruba language means an insect.

It is an inch in length and looks like a big fly. There are two transparent wings underneath a pair of thick wings. The insect's colour is like that of a dried tree. It's difficult to trace, when it is sitting on a tree. If you stand below a tree which has these beetles, there's always a constant sprinkling of water. The insects probes the wood, takes in its moisture and converts it into water, which it sprinkles out. The buzz of these insects is a sign of the monsoon, when all around the flowers too are in full bloom and give out a pleasant smell. Sannaswamy, who was an expert at playing with live toys, was now confined to his house. The other children, too, are very upset about this. Whenever the others prance around to go to the forests, Sannaswamy looks at them with slight envy and, of course, hope.

I was careful not to drive fast, for fear of hurting his leg. When I reached the *haadi*, the children stood in anticipation, waiting to tell me some interesting bit of information.

"The whirlwind blew away madam's sari which she had put for drying near the bore well yesterday, Saa," they reported in chorus. I didn't believe this and joked, "Good it didn't blow your madam away." The children tried hard to convince me and took me to the teacher to hear it in her own words. She looked so crestfallen; anybody would have thought she'd just lost a fortune. I realised now that the adventures of the whirlwind were true.

She cursed the wind. "Did this stupid whirlwind want my sari only? I had only two saris and this one I'd bought recently for Rs. 200. Yesterday I washed all my clothes near the borewell and spread it out to dry. There was this strong whirlwind. I rushed to pull out the clothes. I was about to pull my yellow sari, when the whirlwind spun it around and lifted it up. I just couldn't catch it. The wind took my sari up near the clouds and I don't know where it flung it later. We searched around every where, but couldn't find it." Her sob story continued as she cribbed about leading a life with the measly Rs. 500 salary she receives and how the wind had gobbled up half of her monthly salary.

Puttamma, who was nearby, was waiting to share her experience with the whirlwind. That day, her husband Papaiah, who works as a labourer in the forest department, had not returned from work yet. There was not a drop of drinking water in the house, so she picked up a pot and went near the borewell to fill water. Just as she kept the pot under the mouth of the borewell, three stones fell on her waist."

Thinking it must be the work of someone from her *haadi*, she screamed, "Who is that? I'll kick if I find you!" But there was no one around. She didn't know about the whirlwind, but when the Madam related what had happened, she was convinced it was a ghost in the form of a whirlwind which had pelted stones at her.

The teacher said there was a ghost around there and she couldn't sleep the previous night because she was so scared.

These people had turned a common whirlwind into a ghost. In an effort to dispel their belief, I told them that if the whirlwind had taken away the sari, it would be somewhere nearby. I thought if the sari was found, their fear of the ghost would be unfounded. I divided the children into three groups. The three groups went in three different directions on the 'mission sari.' One group was led by me, while the other two were led by the teacher and Bangi respectively. I had Kariya, Kaala, Hotte and Mari with me.

We went near the area with pits and explored all the pits and bushes around. There was no sari in sight.

Mari and I went ahead. Kariya picked up a plant and plucked out a piece. He blew the dried flowers in to Kaala's face. Kaala's and Kariya's faces were covered with the dried flowers.

"Stop playing now and search for the sari," I ordered. We were so tired searching for the elusive sari and to pump up their sagging spirits; I plucked out the plants with the dried flowers and blew it on to their faces. A light blow was enough for the flower to spread all over, it actually entered the nostrils, shortening my breath.

These plants grow on the ground and have small flowers on them. The tender petals of hundreds of such flowers when dry don't fall off but stick to the plant. When you keep such plants in front of your mouth and lightly blow it, the thin strands float in the air. Since there are lakhs of such thin strands, when you blow it to over someone's face, it covers their entire face.

This game was more fun than searching for the teacher's lost sari! I suddenly realised what we had come here for! No one had spotted the sari. We returned disappointed hoping some other group may have found it.

None of the three groups had found the sari. When we reported this at the *haadi*, slowly each one came up with their experience with the whirlwind. Each was more colourful and imaginative than the other. Mariya and Basavaiah's wives were returning from work, when they heard the moans of a woman from a bush nearby. They went to check but couldn't find anyone. They had the same experience in two or three places on their way back.

The teacher, who was already upset with the disappearance of her sari, was now more irked as all the search expedition proved futile.

"I think the whirlwind liked my sari," she said and added with a firm conclusion, "All this is the ghost's work. Ok even if I'm disappointed, the ghost is at least happy."

## CHAPTER 10

**February 22, 1995**

### **Chandra Makuta Bird-The Hoopoe**

I met Basavaiah of Navile Haadi on the way. "Sir, we've caught a Chandramakuta bird. Come to the *haadi* and take it." I wanted to rear a few birds in the land belonging to my office and had requested him to let me know when they catch some wild birds.

I was very interested in rearing birds but never wanted to cage them. I couldn't rear them in the open as I had no land of my own. A month ago, the co-coordinator of Fedan Vikas, the organisation I worked for, had summoned me to their office. They requested me to look after the 3 acre land of the office and nurture the flora of the place. They said I could take the help of Raju who was already working there. Though it was an additional responsibility, I accepted it because I liked doing it.

Raja, a Jenukuruba, very lovingly tended the plants and trees around. He, too, wanted to rear birds. He knew I visited various *haadis* and he asked me to let the people know we were interested in birds, so they too would look out for some. Now when Basavaiah told me about the bird, I was immediately reminded of the framed photograph of the flying bird in Mr. K. Ramdas's house in Kuvempunagar.



Just like the Japanese women carried dainty coloured fans in their hands, it looked as if these birds had stuck some black and white spots in a bow shape on their wings.

We don't consider black and white as colours at all. It's only when you see a Chandramakuta bird with its wings spread that you realise how beautiful black and white can be! Always with their companions, these birds peck at termites with their long beaks and move slowly, twisting and turning their neck, striking an attractive pose. As I recalled all this, I was excited that I could see a Chandramakuta bird for real!

When I reached the *haadi*, Lingaswamy who had the bird in his hand proudly exhibited the catch. The bird had stuck its head with its comb and long beak in front of his hand and its leg behind and was trying to wriggle out.

The teacher shouted as if someone was strangling her, "Yeh Hotte! Don't hold it with one hand, hold it with both your hands." Lingaswamy loosened his grip, caught it with both his hands very gently and brought it to the teacher's house. He placed it on the ground. A little confused, the bird looked around and pecked at Kaala's out-stretched hand. It didn't hurt Kaala, but only tickled him. He stretched out his hand again. Sannammi, who always disappeared whenever I came, stayed put there and I was surprised to see her hover around the bird and not shy away.

Gange and Gowri are 3-year-old girl twins. I knew them for a year. Initially, they would cry every time they saw me. The crying has stopped now. But they are very shy. They would stay only if all the children were present or would run and hide behind their mother.

Gange and Gowri are nicknamed as Sannammi and Booby respectively. They were always behind the teacher. Putti complained, "We've not been able to sleep properly after this bird was brought. Sannami and Booby get up in the wee hours and cry and insist they be taken to the teacher's house. Even at home, they only talk about the bird. They go on and on with their father about the bird, its long beak, its comb, how it turn its head blah blah and go to sleep even without eating."

The teacher too grumbled about how she couldn't move around in the house, as it was always full of the kids admiring the bird. "I can't even cook. I'm tripping and falling and these idiots don't go home how much ever I shout at them," she said with a big pout. They pretended to go away for sometime but slowly trickled in just a few minutes later. The teacher too forgot she had chased them away and joined them in shaking her head like the bird did and imitating its walk. Perhaps, for the kids, it was more interesting to watch the teacher than watch the bird.

Another attraction of this bird is its comb. If you smoothed it, it opens up and the feathers of the comb fall back again. For the kids, smoothing the comb, seeing it unfurl and fall back was a pleasure, but a real pain for the poor bird.

I strictly told them not to touch the bird's comb. The kids were disappointed, but I was sure the bird felt relieved.

As the bird was not young and had mature wings, they had tied it with a string for fear of it flying off. The bird kept pecking at the thread, hoping to release itself. I understood how it craved to fly. "Please remove the string, it's feeling uncomfortable," I said. Kencha obliged and came forward to unfasten the string, when the teacher pulled him back again, narrating what had happened.

Basavaiah, who caught the bird, had left it in the teacher's care. When it was left to feed on the grains, Sannami and Booby came in and sat watching the bird. The teacher was in the bath. The kids had left the door open. The bird walked in small steps and sneaked out of the room and flew away. The teacher who came out after her bath was shocked to see the bird missing and the door open.

"Where is the bird?" she shouted and the little ones pointed to the opened door. She came screaming out to the other kids. Everyone set out to search for the bird but there was no trace of it even after searching for over an hour. Sannami and Booby were the target of everyone's anger. But Hotte actually blamed the teacher. "Why did you go to have a bath without locking the door?" he had accused her! Engulfed by a sense of guilt, the teacher very

repentantly coaxed them to search again. Kaala, who was snooping around the borewell found the bird! He deftly managed to catch it and brought it back like a big hero.

The other kids touched every part of the bird excitedly. It was then that the teacher ordered the 'string treatment,' so that it doesn't fly off again. I suggested they get a long string and tie one end to a tree and the other to its leg and leave it near some place where cow dung was dumped. I asked all of them to go home. Everyone left. But a few seconds later, they were peeping through the doors and slowly moved near the bird to watch if it was eating anything.

I lost my temper! "You will not let this bird live. You've decided to kill it. Do what you want! I am going." I returned straight home frustrated and angered.

## CHAPTER 11

March 4, 1995

### Catching Fish and Crabs

I had left the *haadi* in a huff, very angry at the way the children had behaved and treated the Chandra Makuta bird. I kept pondering over it all night and feared for the fate of the bird. I couldn't sleep well and tossed in my bed, waiting for the sun to rise. The first thing I did was to go to Navile Haadi before I even went to the office.

When I reached the *haadi*, my heart skipped a beat, as I didn't see children around. The teacher's house too was locked. I imagined the worst! I thought I'll meet *Yajman* Ningaiah and ask him about the fate of the bird and went to his house. But he had already left for work and only his mother-in-law Kempamma was sitting in front of the house. She looked at me and said, "That bird..." As I was all ears to listen to her, she stopped to take out the small bag tucked into her waist. It contained betel nuts. She leisurely pulled out a couple of them, stuffed it in her mouth and took out some betel leaves and some *chuna* from a small box and spread it on the leaves! All this she did at her own sweet pace, while I was so eager to know what happened to the bird.

"What happened to the bird Kempamma?" I asked anxiously.

"That bird..." She stopped again! This time to go and spit the *paan*! She walked to the fence and forcefully spat it out. But her plans to come back

and continue with the story were squashed, as she saw some hens of her neighbour's pecking at the *Toda* paddy that was spread in the yard of their house.

"Who's at home? Your hens are eating my paddy! Take them in," she screamed. But there was no one home, as all of them had gone to work. She ran behind the hens with her stick. But the hens proved too smart for her, as they jumped, flew and ran everywhere, getting nowhere near her. She ran behind them determined to catch the winged thieves.

She was the one, who had broached the topic of the bird, but now she was busy with the hens and I knew she would not come back till she caught them! I was very irritated and looked around to see if I could get the information from anybody else. I saw Kenchaiah sitting in a corner, but he shrugged his shoulders to say he knew nothing! I had no option but to wait for the old woman to come back.

While she ran behind the hens, the goats were feasting on the paddy! There was hardly two kilos of paddy spread there and if the goats ate them up, there would be nothing left! I took a stick and shooed the goats away. They would pretend to go away but came back once I turned away. So it was one constant vigil for me.

I felt sad for these people! To keep watch on two kilos of paddy, they had foregone the day's work that would fetch them 4 kilos. I looked out for the shepherd who had brought the goats to graze, but he was nowhere to be seen. After quite some time, I saw him come slowly towards me. I asked him to take away the goats and told him to tell Kempamma that I was waiting for her, if he saw her on his way.

I would be keeping a vigil on paddy all day today, I thought and bemoaned at my fate. I was curious to see how the the coops to keep hens would be built and peeped into them. A mud wall, 1 ½ feet in height, was built adjoining the wall of the house. A small door through which only one hen could enter was made in the front. The coop top was covered with two tiles on which 4-5 *Bhoothale* (Smallflower Century Plant) fronds were spread. These fronds protected the coop from getting heated, during summer, and

from water seeping in, during the rainy season. The hens could go in only if the door was lifted. This works like a shutter and it's not easy for animals to get in. There are foxes around the area and to prevent them from opening the doors, they were made as shutters.

As I kept observing the coop, I heard the noise of the children. Kempamma, too, was in the group and the kids had the hens in their hands. Seeing how anxious I was, the teacher immediately started to narrate the bird episode to me.

The bird refused to eat anything for almost two days. It only kept turning its head when spoken to, but refused to eat! The *Girijans* who realised how difficult it was to tame these birds decided to leave it in the forests instead of letting it die. They carried the bird to the forest and left it near a thick bush. It was noon by the time all this happened and I decided not to go to the office now. I'd rather roam the forests.

The children insisted that we go the Taraka Canal to catch crabs. Papaiah and Kempamma joined us in our crab hunt. They carried a tiffin carrier without a lid. I assumed it was to bring back crabs.

"You don't have a lid for this?"

"I do," he said and walked ahead!

Knowing how the crabs pull each other's legs and try to crawl out, I told him that the crabs may escape if the carrier didn't have a lid.

"Sir, this is not to catch crabs. It is to throw water from the canal."

The canal was some 30-40 feet long. If they wanted to fill water, throw it out and then catch crabs and fish it would take at least 3, 4 days! Were they joking?

When we reached the canal, some of them got into the canal, walked through it and identified the areas where they could catch crabs. Papaiah selected a spot which was hardly 1 ½ feet deep. "Let's build a bund here and catch fish" he said.

The children pulled out mounds of mud along with the grass on it from the sides of the canal. Papaiah used it to build a small bund. When the mounds were pulled out, tiny crabs crawled out from under them and the children quickly caught them and put them in a cloth and tied it up.

Kaala was given the responsibility of keeping watch on the cloth bundle which had the crabs in it. He was the youngest in the group. When a crab slowly crawled out from the bundle, he would crawl on all fours and catch it and put it back in the bundle, when another would crawl out! He chased all of them and looked like a crab himself.

By this time, a bund was built in the water with the mud. The upper bund was a little bigger, while the lower one was built to the level of the water. Oh! Now they are going to throw all this water out using the tiffin carrier. This will never work, I thought disappointed at their planning. Papaiah picked up small twigs of the *Honge* tree nearby. He broke the lower bund in the middle, kept the twigs there and piled some 3, 4 stones on them. Now the water in the bund flowed down slowly.

"Come Saa! The water will be emptied in an hour! We'll stroll around till then." I was amazed at their engineering skills and felt bad at having underestimated them! When I was young, I had accompanied my people to catch fish at the Laxmanthirtha canal. The people had built a similar bund and struggled to empty the water by lifting it in buckets. They worked all day and were so tired by the time they emptied the water. I assumed it was such a Herculean task and was amazed at how easily these people had found a way to catch fish. The place where they decide to build the bund also was appropriate and water flowed down from the top. Some wild greens were stuffed into the area where the bund was broken. When asked why he had done this, Papaiah replied it was to avoid the *soslu* slipping away.

The teacher wanted to pick some weaver bird's nest to hang it in the *Shishuvihar Kendra* and she took us along. The weaver birds had built their nests in the tress along the banks of the canal. Smaller than a sparrow, these birds build their nests so deftly and intricately.

On the way, I told them some facts about these weaver birds. The male birds build such beautiful nests to woo the females. The female birds, which are attracted by these beautiful houses, come in to start a family. When the female is ready to lay eggs, the male starts building another nest to woo another female bird. Building new nests and wooing new females every time and procreating, the male bird was a big flirt indeed!

Ningaswamy pointed out a tree that had several such nests. Kencha volunteered to climb the tree and pick a few nests. When he was trying to climb a tree, a peahen emerged from a bush nearby and hopped onto another bush. The children stoned the bush the peahen tried to hide in, chased it and finally caught it. They were thrilled at their success. The peahen weighed nearly three kilogrammes and I knew there was a big feast waiting for them tonight.

By the time we returned to the bund, the water had completely flown down and several young fish were trying to jump up. We caught a lot of fish and crabs here. But in our enthusiasm to catch the peahen, we had forgotten to collect the weaver's nests.

The teacher was very unhappy and accused the entire male clan for not keeping their word. She said everyone was a cheat just like the male weaver bird!

Everyone forced me to stay back for dinner as they would cook their prized catch. But I was in a hurry to get back and said I would be their guest some other day and left the place.



## CHAPTER 12

**April 30, 1995**

### **Hunting For The Keera - The Mongoose**

Paramesh the photographer came to my house at Kabini colony. He had taken 3 days off to spend some time here and take a photo shoot of the different landscapes in the Kabini backwaters.

Around 61 square kilometres are completely covered with water during the rainy season. When the water level goes down in summer, many areas lie barren and you see an array of shapes of these barren patches and you get a clear idea of the dried up land. Earlier we had walked 20 to 30 kilometres along the backwaters of the Kabini dam. The lakes, ponds and historical places that were submerged in the waters seemed very significant to us. Paramesh wanted to dig a little deeper into the history of the place and unearth some interesting facts.

I had collected facts about 22 villages that were submerged and sent them to him. I had also attached information about the condition of the 14 *Girijan haadis*, with a population of about 1045 people. This information had not been recorded or mentioned anywhere else before this.

My report highlighted the plight of the hapless *Girijans*, who in the fear of being drowned, had fled their *haadis* and were scattered all over. The Public

Works Department conducts a survey of only the villages that have revenue land and makes alternate arrangements for the land losers in such villages.

The department fails to pay any attention to the Adivasi *Girijans* who make their living, cultivating small portions of land, without any records in the Kakanakote Forests. Paramesh too empathised with this unfortunate lot and we had agreed to do a pictorial feature on the issue. It was planned several months ago, but Paramesh had found time only now! He was here with all the necessary preparations for the shoot.

I was happy too that he could make it at least now. As we were old friends, he tasted the warm hospitality of my wife Lakshmi, who gave him steaming *Upma* to eat. He had just finished the last morsel, when he got an emergency call asking him to report to duty immediately. Very disappointed, I went to drop him at the Hand Post, from where he could catch a bus.

We had actually decided to take off on Sunday and start work from Monday. Paramesh too was very disappointed at the sudden turn of events and said he would come back the very next week.

"Once the rains start, everything will again be covered with water. So we'd better start before that," he said, bidding farewell.

After the 10 kilometres drive to the Hand Post, I drove back with my spirits quite low. I saw the children of Navile Haadi and the teacher pelting stones at a mango tree near Shirumalli. I was happy to see them and decided to join them. I got off the bike and walked near them.

I had not visited the *haadi* for over a month and they were all very upset. All the anger was vented now as they started pelting stones at me! I ducked and reached them. The teacher had a big face which she turned away when I greeted her. Bangi, Hotte, Jayakka, everyone pretended not to see me and gave me the royal ignore! All my efforts to talk to them were in vain.

I tried pacifying them, explaining how busy I was at work. No one relented even after I spent half an hour trying to make truce! I knew I had to find another way out.

"Hey! Look! There's a *Keera* there," I screamed. "It's gone into the fence. Come, let's catch it."

Everyone ran towards the fence. But when they saw me laughing, they realised it was only my joke! This worked as a good ice-breaker and I was friends with them again, as I joined them on their walk.

The teacher gave me a colourful picture of all their pranks and also explained how she had become very attached to the kids. She was very upset about her transfer to another *haadi*. She couldn't bear the thought of being away from the kids and was almost in tears.

"I don't want to go to another *haadi*. I'll go back home to Kodagu. It's hardly two years since I came here. What was the necessity to transfer me?"

I had to console her. "That's ok. There are children in the other *haadi* too, who will become close to you. Initially, you may feel it a little difficult to cope with the new environment. But I'm sure you'll settle down. Don't quit your job because of this."

Hotte had picked up a caterpillar, the size of a finger, which had little twigs stuck all round its body to protect itself from predators. He held it front of the teacher. The worm lay still for sometime and then started swinging along with the stick.

Ningaswamy asked everyone to sit in a circle. The caterpillar, covered with twigs, was placed in the centre. The person towards whom the worm swings should get a wood apple from the nearby tree, he said, explaining the rules of the game.

I couldn't climb a plant, forget about a tree! I wondered what I will do, if the little worm swung towards me. But it actually swung towards the teacher, who got up absolutely unperturbed. Will she climb the tree now? No! She pelted stones at the wood apples on the tree. After aiming at least 8 – 10 stones, she managed to get just one fruit. As we were playing, a *Keera* turned towards us, stared, and ran towards the fence. My joke had actually turned

true. The kids sprang up, whistled to Naayi Mani and pushed it near the fence. With a stick in each hand, they stood guard of the fence.

It was a thick fence and Naayi Mani couldn't enter wherever the *Keera* moved. The stones that the children threw also bounced back, after hitting the over grown branches in the fence. Even after half an hour, all our efforts to catch the *Keera* went in vain. But these children don't give up easily. The more disappointed they are, the more determined they become to accomplish the task. I wondered how they would get it out in such a tricky situation.

Lingaswamy got hold of a sturdy stick and began sharpening one end till almost half the length of the stick. The *Keera* was terrified with all the noise and had huddled in the corner. The weapon, a one and a half feet stick with a sharp edge, was now ready to be used. Sannaswamy and Basava stealthily came around the fence. They slowly put the stick in from behind, through the bush, near the place where the *Keera* was huddled.

They kept pushing the stick slowly, till there was about a foot distance between the *Keera* and the stick. Sannaswamy, with all his efforts, gave one final push and the *Keera* was impaled on the stick. It tried in vain to escape but the stick had pierced its stomach.

They now pulled the *Keera* out and put it in the faded bag they carried. Everyone wanted to carry the bag but Basava declared that the person who was not a part of the hunt should carry it. I had to carry the weight. The children who were till then hovering around the teacher, left her, and marched behind me, all their eyes on the bag and, of course, me! Even the teacher's tail, Jayakka, deserted her and joined the group. While some kids touched the bag often to feel the *Keera*, the others tried rubbing it with their body. Some even tried to jump and peep into the small opening of the bag.

For the children, the bag was the centre of attraction and I, who was carrying it, was the core of all their attention. The teacher, who I think felt a little left out, trudged slowly behind us.

We were so excited and curious about the creature in the bag, we'd come a long way forgetting about the teacher. Jayakka realised her 'Idol' was missing

and shouted for her. We all turned but couldn't find her anywhere nearby. We walked back in search of her and saw her sitting under the jackfruit tree with her leg stretched out. Basava assumed a thorn had pricked her. He quickly pulled out another thorn of the *Boothale Patty* and got ready for a minor surgery.

But the teacher was touched to see every one's concern. "I am ok, let's be going," she said, leading the pack. I slowly transferred the catch bag to her. Kempa had an interesting tale to share from his father Basavaiah's repertoire.

Basavaiah had set out hunting with 8 to 10 of his people. Though the *Girijans* are thrown out of the forest, they still follow the tradition of hunting for an animal in the forest and bringing it to the *haadi* during important festivals. So, on the eve of Ugadi, everyone left with their *ada donne* and a huge loop made out of rope, used to catch rabbits, wild cats and wild boars. The *Girijans* hunt for five specific species of cats and relish eating them.

*Bookanakotthi*: It's a little bigger than the domestic cat and lives in the holes and inner trunks of trees.

*Murjukotthi*: It's smaller than a normal cat but its skin is unique with several stripes on it.

*Kadu Bekku*: Its as big as a dog. One should be very careful while hunting it as it bites any one it comes across.

*Haara*: This has a very special body. As big as a domestic cat, it has a black face resembling a bat. Its skin is almost flat as are its limbs. It jumps like a glider from tall trees and, just like a glider, floats in the air before coming down. It lives in the holes of the tree trunk. The male and the female go searching for food together during the night. It eats wooden splits, shoots, and the fruit of the *tare* tree.

It's a born acrobat. It climbs the branch of a tree and lands under another tree, trapezing its way down. It hugs the bottom of the tree, fixes its claws to the trunk and quickly climbs up. The *Girijans* have to *inevitably* jump from

one tree to another to catch this cat. In fact, it is said the Haara cat has taught them how to climb trees.

When Basavaiah and his gang went to Kakanakote forest to hunt, one such cat jumped from one tree to another tree under which Basavaiah was standing. He was leaning on the trunk and the cat clasped him, thinking he was the tree, and started climbing up. He froze with fear and stood still, as he knew it would bite him if he moved. The cat had fixed its claws into his skin, and only when it went up him and on to the tree, did he come away, running in fright. But the claws had injured his skin all over and he was bleeding. This did not dissuade him from continuing the hunt. All the pain was gone, when he had the cat in his bag!

*Punagana* cat: It has a thick and long tail. The *Girijans* love the taste of its meat.

Kempa continued to entertain us with the hunting tales.

Once a group, which had hunted a rabbit, was so tired, they decided to rest for sometime under a tree. But they saw a strange sight there. A sharp stick had pierced right through the anus of a huge wild dog. The dog probably couldn't get it out and had breathed its last in the same position. They also heard the moans of a leopard from atop the tree. It took sometime for them to understand what may have transpired.

A wild dog had chased the leopard, which climbed up the tree and took refuge in a big hole in the trunk. The dog which tried jumping up to catch the leopard, had lost its balance and fallen back, only to land on the sharp end of the stick. Though the dog had died, it probably was in the same posture looking up the tree, which scared the leopard so much, it had stayed there for at least 10 to 15 days. It had become so weak now, it couldn't climb down. The hunters brought it down, fed the rabbit they had hunted into its mouth, giving it some strength to walk and led it into the forest.

The wild dogs are ferocious and a pack of them hunts tigers and leopards. These animals which terrorize other animals in the forest, actually flee when they see a pack of wild dogs coming.

Kencha's thrilling stories made the walk much easier.

## CHAPTER 13

**May 6, 1995**

### **The Regular Winged Visitors**

**T**he festering wound on Sannaswamy's leg had worsened and the leg was almost rendered useless now. *Yajman* Ningaiah urged me to help the boy and get him the allowance given to handicapped persons. Apart from Sannaswamy, there were quite a few handicapped *Girijans* in and around the place and I thought I would be doing a good deed, if I could help them get this allowance. I had met Dr. Shivakumar, the doctor at the Government Hospital in H.D. Kote and requested him to issue certificates in favour of these people. He fixed a date and asked me to bring all the handicapped persons to the hospital on that day.

I had to inform Sannaswamy's parents about this and decided to go to the *haadi* to meet them. I met Sannaswamy's father Lingaiah, and told him to bring his son to the hospital on the said date without fail. The children of the *haadi* were playing a 'Bus game.' Sannami, Booby, Kencha and others were the passengers of their imaginary bus, with Kaala as its driver. Their 'bus' was a long *Ugani* creeper, which they had converted into a big loop. The passengers and the driver were in the loop and moved in which ever direction the driver turned.

Kaala looked like a very experienced driver, as he manoeuvred the steering wheel very deftly. Suddenly, he applied the brakes and the bus halted. "Antharasanthe anybody? Get off here," he shouted, at which Kencha hopped out of the loop. Kenchi too hopped out instructing Kaala, "This guy wants to go to Kakankote. Please drop him off there." They seemed to thoroughly enjoy this role-play, as much as Sannaswamy did by simply watching them. "This is the Modern Company bus, Saa," he told me enthusiastically.

Modern Bus is a private bus that operates everyday between Mysore and Manandavadi in Kerala, via the Kakanakote Forests. The people of the *haadi* are very familiar with the bus. Sannaswamy, though completely incapacitated because of his leg, was so enthused to see his friends play, that he mentally played along. This was a welcome diversion for him from his pain and helplessness.

I could see only 3-4 kids playing here. The others, I learnt, had had gone to the nearby 'Boring' (meaning borewell) with the teacher. The borewell is situated two furlongs from the *haadi* and there's a story behind how this borewell was dug.

The *Girijans*, who cultivated a little land near the banks of the Naviluru Lake and earned their living through it, were harassed by the villagers so much that they were forced to leave the place. The displaced people found shelter at Depomala, a mile away from where they stayed. This area belonged to the forest department. They put up their huts in the area and started living there. The farmers had already gobbled up 100 acres of this sprawling land which measured more than 200 acres. The forest department hadn't raised a whimper then. But when these poor people put up their huts, they raised a hue and cry and started harassing them to no end, even threatening to send them to jail if they didn't leave the place.

The *Girijans* had settled there, even though they know there was no water source anywhere nearby. They had to escape the harassment by the villagers and it didn't matter if they had no water! But here too, the forest department proved a thorn in their flesh.



One night, there was a sudden fire and all their huts were burnt down. They came running next morning to the Fedena Vikas office, alleging that the forest department had burnt down their huts. When we met the officials concerned, they were very casual about the whole incident and denied the allegation. Their explanation was not convincing at all. The poor people were so disturbed and scared about their future. We consoled them and tried to pump in some confidence. "Don't move from there. Stay put and build new huts in the same place," we suggested, hoping to find a solution fast.

The Peoples Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) sent a human rights team to do a thorough investigation and found the forest department guilty. It exposed the department's acts by publishing the reports in the media, after which the department stopped interfering in their lives.

Though the *Girijans* rebuilt their huts here, they had to travel miles together to fetch water. Several pleas to the officials concerned to dig a borewell fell on deaf ears. They ignored the pleas, saying the department had already conducted a survey and there was no water table in the area to dig a borewell.

Mariah who lived in the *haadi* had a daughter who had lost both her legs. When everyone left for work, she was left behind alone. On one such day, the poor girl who felt very thirsty had searched for water everywhere, but all the vessels in the house were dry. She breathed her last, not able to get water to quench her thirst. She was found with one hand inside a dry pot!

The news reached Fedena Vikas office. Incidentally, my friend, Gururaj, working for the newspaper 'Samyuktha Karnataka' was at the office to collect some details. When he heard the news, he immediately rushed to the place and collected information. The death of Maraiah's daughter, under the heading 'Girijan girl dies of thirst,' was splashed across the newspapers.

The officials of the revenue department who realised the seriousness of the situation finally woke up! They visited the *haadi* with a few experts, detected the place where there was groundwater and the borewell was dug in just two days. For the *Girijans*, who had suffered such acute water scarcity, the bore well was a god send! It's also a place for them to play with water.

Pumpkin, bottle gourd and some other creepers have grown abundantly with the water running from the borewell. The *Girijans* have also sown ragi in some places in the 100 acres belonging to the forest department. A large pit is dug near the borewell and water is stored in it for the cattle to drink. Everyone grows enough ragi and maize for their families. When the forest officials come for inspection, they put their plough down and swear they will not cultivate again, only to pick it up when they go away!

I reached the borewell, comparing their lives now to how it was 5 years ago. Jayakka was pumping water for the teacher to wash her clothes. The children had gathered around the pit containing water for the cattle and were screaming and laughing in glee.

Kenchu was pressing down a stick in the water, as the children were counting from one to ten, observing the end of the stick he held. Before they could count ten, a dried bottle gourd bobbed up. Now it was Kariya's turn. He stuck the stick in the middle of the bottle gourd and pushed into the water. But it popped up, even before the count of five! The game was to see who could keep the bottle gourd in the water for the longest time. Jayakka stopped pumping water and joined the kids in the drowning game. The teacher who waited for Jayakka, came searching for her, hands full of soap!

Now all the children held the bottle gourd down to see how long it remains in the water. Ningaswamy hit the gourd very hard. But he missed the target and hit the water with so much force that all the muddy water splashed over the teacher's clothes!

She yelled and cursed them, even as another huge splash from Bangi's stick drenched her. She was fuming as she had just finished her bath and had changed into fresh clothes. "You are the one who has given them so much freedom. See how naughty they've become," she yelled at me.

I was used to these accusations by now and tried consoling her by telling her the story of the bottle gourd and how it was woven into the culture of these *Girijans*.

"Once upon a time," I started off in fairy tale fashion, "...there was a *haadi* just like this where the *Girijans* lived. Other people too lived in nearby areas. One day there were dark clouds in the sky followed by torrential rains and huge winds. The whole earth was flooded. A brother and sister belonging to a *Girijan* family were stranded in the water. They found a big empty shell of a bottle gourd and, in a bid to escape, they hid inside the shell. There was a deluge and the entire earth was submerged in water. But the brother and sister, who had hid inside the gourd shell, did not drown. They drifted along with the waves and went wherever the waves took them. Finally, the rains stopped, the water receded and they were washed ashore to some land. By then, all the creatures on the earth were dead and they were the only two survivors. They decided to get together and procreate and that's how life started again."

"We, all of us, including you, are here because of the gourd. The human race would have been washed away but for its shelter," is how passionately the *Girijans* revere the gourd shell. My story had had a profound effect on the teacher, who had forgotten all about the mud on her dress. She recalled how the *Jenukurubas* shook the gourd shells in the night and tried to invoke the spirits of their elders and the Gods. She walked back to the *haadi* as if in a trance. The children too followed suit. They suddenly spotted something and yelled. "Nelagunasakki and Kala Basakki have come out. Look!"

These were the names of the birds which are regular visitors to the *haadi* from 6.30 to 7.00 in the evening.

The bird, with a head as big as a pigeon's, has black stripes all over its body. Its called *Bijju* (the *Shikra*) in the rural tongue and has sturdy yellow-coloured talons. Its unique feature is its ability to stand still in mid-air. As it flies, it flaps its wings and stops to look for its prey. It continues flying, stopping thus frequently, looking for its prey.

It feeds mainly on rats, bugs, black ants and other insects. It lays eggs during February and April. It builds nests in the holes of tree trunks, on branches or dilapidated buildings. Three or four eggs are laid at one time and both the male and female take turns to brood.

## 78 Playing with the children of the forest

It perches itself on the bushes around the *haadi* and looks down on the ground flapping its wings. This bird has wide white wings and a red beak and the kids love it. When the bird flies and suddenly stands still, they pelt stones at it. It jumps on to another bush and they chase it. Sannami and Booby also try to chase the bird but cry when they can't keep pace with its speed.

## CHAPTER 14

**May 18, 1995**

### **Touch Me Not**

**M**y interest in land led me to buy some land for cultivation. I found some time to cultivate that piece of land now. I had applied for a week's leave and had completed all the cultivation work and I still had a day to spare, before I went back to work. I decided I would visit the *haadi* and spend some time with the kids there.

They were surprised to see me back so soon, but nevertheless glad too! It was still 7 in the morning but I could find only a few children. They had gone with their nets to catch some wild birds. I was enthusiastic to join them and asked the other kids to come along, when Kempamma suggested that I take the teacher too with me, as all these children were still very young.

I went to check with her but found the door closed. Assuming she must be sleeping, I waited for sometime and knocked again. No response. After some more persistent knocking, I heard her shout.

"You kids will never leave me in peace, will you? Wait till I get at you."

The door opened with a bang and she almost held me!

"Oh! It's you, is it? Couldn't you have told me?" she blushed. As she let me in, the pleasant aroma of *agarbatthi* wafted around the room, as I noticed a God's photo hanging on the wall. I had never seen it before.

"How come the God has appeared here suddenly?"

The teacher related the episode that led to shopping for the photo. The recent days were not very pleasant for her. She was very disturbed and upset at being transferred to a far-off *haadi* near a dense forest. There was no bus or road connectivity to this *haadi* and there was elephant menace around the *haadi*. How could she, a lone woman, stay in such places? It worried her no end and the rumours that people of the neighbouring village 'were not alright' only fuelled her anxiety.

The *Girijans* of Navile Haadi pleaded with the co-ordinator of the organisation not to transfer her. But he was very firm about not cancelling the transfer order at any cost. This had stressed her so much, she couldn't eat or sleep in peace.

In times of distress, it is God who is remembered the most! She realised, if she atleast had a God's photo in the house and prayed fervently, he would help. As a coincidence, a street vendor selling pins, beads, chains and other accessories came near her house carrying a god's photo in his basket. She had bargained and bought the photo for Rs. 18 and, very devotedly, hung it inside the house. Now everyday, very piously, she has a cold water bath and lights the lamp and prays fervently for the transfer order to be cancelled. When I had knocked at the door, she was immersed in her prayers.

I understood her dilemma and empathised with her predicament. When she saw me lost in thought, she consoled me, "That's ok, Sir! It's all my fate." The problem seemed so much lighter when the blame was passed on to fate! We left for the forests with Sannami, Booby and Jadiya, who trod slowly with their small steps. Sanammi, true to her name, was a thin frail kid, who fell sick very often. Though we were reluctant to take these kids with us, they were adamant.

Kempamma had said the older children had not gone very far and we had to cross two fields to catch them, so we decided to tag along. Sannami couldn't walk and she sat down crying. The teacher quickly put her on her waist, like one would carry a pot of water.

The children saw us coming and proudly showed us two birds, the quails that they had captured. Jayakka came running towards us and carried Sannami. The children had woven a square-shaped trap with a number of sticks. They placed the trap in a strategic place and asked all of us to move away. Kencha pulled the strings attached to the trap, tucked it in the fence nearby, and hid near it. He warned us not to make any noise.

In just a little while, three quails came flying to eat the ragi spread inside the trap. They hopped into the trap, when Kencha quickly tugged at the string. Two birds were trapped inside, while the third managed to escape. The other kids came out from their hiding shouting in glee and secured the trap.

As we walked back to the *haadi*, Gudda explained to us the skills required to trap these birds. They prepare the trap with sticks, and keep it in a place where they are sure the birds will come. A lot of ragi is spread inside the trap and, for the next few days, no one disturbs the birds, which come to feed. Initially apprehensive, after a day or two, the birds assume it's a safe place to eat and this confidence leads to their capture. When they are trapped, the birds are totally unaware of the 'spying crew.'

When we reached the *haadi*, the teacher instructed Puttamma, the cook, to finish the cooking early, as we had to return to the forests with the children. I thought I'd take a stroll round the *haadi*, while the teacher prepared breakfast. All the children had already gathered at the front yard of a house and were busy in their game.

A big cooking vessel, which had buffed up at the bottom, was their toy this time. They put Jadiya inside the vessel and turned it. The vessel spun around like a top, making a big noise. It was pure fun, as the smaller ones took turns to sit in the vessel.

Puttamma, the cook, came looking for a vessel that was missing from the kitchen and here it was! Seething in anger, she picked up a stick to spank the kids, who gave her the slip and ran away in all directions, leaving Sannami still in the vessel. The steaming nutritious food, in the form of medium-sized balls, was now ready. In the meanwhile, the teacher and me finished our breakfast too. Our organisation prepares the nutritious food supplied to the

kids at the *Shishuvihar Kendras*. Black channa, green gram, ragi, rice, along with groundnuts, in equal proportions are roasted well and turned into a fine flour in the flour mill. This flour is used to make *upma*, *roti*, *dosa*, *kheer* and flour balls that can be swallowed. Several children have recovered from anaemia, after eating the nutritious food prepared by us.

As we walked towards the forest, Bangi suddenly tugged at the *Ugani* creeper stretching on the ground. The teacher, who was busy talking to me, stepped on it, tripped and fell down! The children couldn't hold back their laughter! A few minutes later, the teacher tried the same trick on the children and they all fell down en masse! I was not spared either. The kids formed their own small groups and walked faster than us. The teacher was very depressed at the thought of having to leave these kids behind. She shared all the good moments she had spent with them. Both of us were so engrossed in our conversation, we didn't realise that children were no where in sight!

We walked back in search of them and saw a group huddled around the touch-me-not plants. They tried to see if they could pinch out the plants, without letting the leaves fold in when touched. But every time someone touched the plants, the leaves folded in.

Basava plucked the round pink flower, held it in his cupped palms and gently blew it. The flower twirled around inside his palms. I had seen and heard about this plant, but hadn't seen anybody playing with its small flowers! Each one picked up a flower and beamed when it twirled around in their palms. It looked so simple, the teacher and I decided to give it a try. But every time we blew, the flower fell back instead of twirling around.

Basava explained how it was done. When the flower is plucked, the calyx too should be pinched off in a circular shape, equal to the shape of the flower. This way the flower retains its bloom and doesn't fold in. When you place it within both palms which are cupped, and slowly blow it, it floats around inside. We tried and it worked! You never fail to appreciate and marvel at the sense of minute details these kids have.

Another group was busy making pin-wheels from the dried eucalyptus leaves. A thorn was fixed to the end of a stick. Two dried leaves were fixed



to the end of the thorn. When held in the direction of the wind, the leaves turned swiftly. But they wouldn't move if there was no breeze. The teacher stood on one foot and turned the leaves in one hand. It picked up momentum and turned much faster. Everyone followed her. The kids also stood on one leg and started going round and round only to faint!

Kaala made a different kind of a pin-wheel. This had only one dried leaf. He had cut off the lower portion of the left end of the leaf and a little from the top right end. Now when a thorn was pierced through the centre, it turned into a fast spinning pin-wheel. The new one looked much better and everyone made theirs in a few seconds.

Kariya stopped to see something on the ground. It was a line of black ants holding on to something. The ants moved forward. But when they returned they had nothing with them.

We keenly followed the ant line to see where it ended. The line was a long one across grass, bushes and weeds. Their target was the anthill of termites. The ants slowly picked up the termite and took it back to put it in their tiny homes. So true to their laborious nature, the ants carried on their food transportation relentlessly. Suddenly Kaala spat on the ants and they all ran helter-skelter. The disturbed ants swarmed onto the feet of the children and the teacher and bit them hard. It was a sight to see them all dancing! I quickly left the place, not wanting to be the next target.

Basava picked up a few eggs which were lying on the rock nearby and said we could roast and eat them. When I observed the pale brown coloured eggs with some faded spots on them, I realised they were the eggs of the *Tittiba* bird.

I knew, if the eggs were brooded properly, they would hatch. I asked the kids if any hen in their houses had sat for brooding that day. Kaala said a hen had started brooding since yesterday in his house. I thought I could get these eggs hatched if I pushed them under the brooding hen. I gave the eggs to Kaala and asked him to take them home safely. He stuffed the eggs into his short's pocket.

We had to hurry back as darkness had already set in. As we neared the *haadi*, we saw Lingaswamy jump up in shock and let out a small cry! He was just a few steps away from a fence where a cobra was lazing around with its hood fully open! He was so shocked he jumped behind, only to hit Kaala so hard that the latter fell to the ground, crushing the eggs he had in his pocket! Poor thing! He was wet and sticky with the broken eggs, while all my dreams to hatch them were smashed too.

We walked back to the *haadi*, thinking about the long legs of the *Tittiba* bird, the way it flew around in the night making the 'tit bit' sound.

## CHAPTER 15

June 6, 1995

### The Mouse Trap and the Ghost of fire

The teacher of Navile Haadi had sent a note to me through Basavaiah. "I am leaving for Kogile Haadi tomorrow to report for work. I want to roam the forests with these children for the last time today. I also plan to cook some tasty food for them in the forests. Please make time to join us."

I decided I would go, applied for leave and left for the *haadi* with Basavaiah. When I entered the teacher's house, the smaller children were playing with colourful toys.

Rajani, a friend who had visited the *Shishuvihar Kendra*, was very impressed by the activities of the children. When she went back, she managed to get hold of a lot of colourful toys and sent them here with the help of the Peepul Tree organisation she worked for.

They were mainly wooden toys - balls, puzzles, different sized bangles etc. Some of them were plastic ones, including house building sets, puzzles and the like.

I was very happy at Rajani's gesture. But there was a fear that with these toys around, the children would not interact as much with natural things around them and would lose their spontaneity of turning indigenous material

into a toy of their choice. There was an instruction not to use these toys too often. Since it was her last day with the children, the teacher had been generous and let them play.

Bangi, Ningaswamy and Kencha, the older children were busy, collecting cooking vessels from everyone's house. Kencha, who had his palms on the mouth of a vessel, shouted "Saa! Come see what's here." I peeped in and saw some tiny creatures fluttering around. Kencha took them out. They were the young ones of a blue rock pigeon. They had mature wings, which glistened in the sunlight, to show a mixture of grey, blue and green colours.

I had often encountered these wild pigeons, while moving around on my bike.

They block the road and will not budge till you go very near them. Just when you think you have almost run over them, they fly away flapping their wings with a big noise. They look very pretty with their wings spread like a fan.

I took the young one in my hand, admiring the smooth and lustrous texture of its wings. But our earlier experience had taught us how difficult it was to domesticate or tame these wild birds. "We'll leave these in the forests. Let them fly away," I said much to the disappointment of the children.

Bangi brought a *Ili Katri* and a bow and filled something in a vessel. He told me they were rats which they would roast and eat in the forests.

Every Jenukuruba family has an *Ili katri* which translates into 'Rat scissors.' It's one of the innumerable traps they make to catch different animals. They are either nets, ropes or traps, made with different materials and knotted according to need. A wired loop to catch rabbits and a bamboo trap to catch wild cats. *Paaje*, a device made from the end hairs of a cow's tail, is used to catch the birds that come to eat the winged insects during the rainy season. *Antina Kali*, a sticky device is used to catch the *Goruvanka* birds (common Mynah), while the *Ili katri* is their mouse trap. Several such hunting instruments are being used by the tribe for centuries.

A string is tied to a bamboo stick. The string is pulled and tied down to form a bow shape and a stick is tied across it. These *Ili katris* are placed in areas where the rats move frequently. When a rat crosses this device, it has to touch a small protruding stick inside. When it touches this stick, the string tied to the bamboo stick is released and the stick tied across the bow falls on the rat pressing it down. It works in the scissor mechanism, and hence the name.

Bangi's father Papaiah had prepared 7-8 such katris for us the previous night. Some five, six rats had already been hunted down and were now in Bangi's vessel, waiting to be eaten.

The teacher collected the toys back from the little ones and packed them. I saw that she was extremely irritable and impatient. Her eyes were red and swollen. She had probably not slept the whole night and had cried continuously!

"What have you done to yourself? You need to pull yourself up." These words from me were enough for her to give vent to her feelings. She sobbed her heart out in front of the kids who looked puzzled.

I had also requested the co-ordinators to cancel her transfer orders, but they seemed very adamant. I felt helpless too. "Look, don't cry in front of the kids! You have no more tears left I suppose! You've cried so much. Adapt yourself to the new environment. People who stay at Kogile Haadi are also Jenukurubas and they will protect and safeguard you," I said, trying to assure her.

I knew the Jenukurubas well by now. Once they trust someone, they will go to any extent to protect them. But the teacher didn't seem convinced. She looked like the suffering rat caught in the *Ili Katri*! I sighed and came out of the house. She came out after sometime wiping away her tears but still sobbing. "It's okay. I'll have to adjust," she said, fondling the kids and got ready to go.

As we got ready to leave, Kencha rushed to the fence nearby and picked some pods of the *Parvatha* plant. Gudda followed and plucked the pods along with the nodes.

The nodes are cut and the covering is slightly split. When you blow into it, small bubbles are released. In the sunlight, these bubbles take on the colours of a rainbow and are a treat to watch. As Gudda blew the bubbles, the other kids jumped to burst them and a thin film stuck to their hands.

"Don't let it touch your clothes. It'll stain them," shouted the teacher.

But the clothes these kids wore were so worn out and torn, some stains wouldn't make any difference!!

The *Parvatha* pods turned into a cart in Kencha's hands. He fixed the pods to the two ends of a half-foot stick and ensured that they moved freely. He tied another stick to the middle with the *Ugani* creeper. His cart was ready now. He invited everyone to sit on his royal cart and they obliged! Kencha pulled the cart, even as everyone pretended to be seated comfortably and enjoying the free ride. After sometime, they got bored and pretended to get off the cart.

Lingaswamy pointed to a Banyan tree at a distance. That would be our make-shift kitchen today. The *Parvatha* pod had now turned into a sling shot.

Bangi fixed one pod to a 1 ½-feet-long stick and circled the stick very fast. When he stopped, the pod would fly a long distance. You cannot fling it as far with your bare hands.

The teacher too tried her hand at it! Unfortunately, the pod that left her stick, hit Kariya's back and he sat down crying! Trying to pacify him, the teacher gave him a stick and asked him to hit her, which he gladly agreed. Of course, she dodged the pod! We reached the Banyan tree and disembarked.

A big pit under the tree was filled with sand, creating a nice sand pit. There were bushes around the tree which acted like a wall and controlled

the wind. Tired of walking in the sun, all of us jumped on the cool sand and rolled in glee.

The children went to collect dried twigs from the bushes nearby. I tried collecting some and got scratches all over! Three stones arranged in a triangular shape was our stove. Dried twigs were pushed in and lit up.

We now had a full-blown stove. Bangi climbed up the Banyan tree and threw down its leaves. In a few minutes, the kids had pieced them together with small sticks and we had enough leafy plates. The leaves were very soft to touch.

The children decided to stroll and explore, while the food was being cooked. "Madam! See what's here," Booby shouted and all of us went to see what it was.

A black dung beetle was trying to push a lemon-sized ball of cow dung. It was interesting to see how it pushed the ball, almost 100 times the size of its body. It pressed its forefeet to the ground and pushed the ball with its hind feet. When the ball moved forward, it climbed up, looked around, came down and continued to push. When the cow dung disintegrated a little, it quickly rolled it back into the ball with the help of its mouth.

I recalled that Parmesh and I had seen five such cow-dung balls together in one place when we were roaming the plains of the Kabini reservoir. We too had seen a dung beetle rolling a sixth ball towards the pile.

We wondered if these bees were collecting food like the ants do. But Parmesh said they were collecting them to lay eggs in. I took the six cow dung balls home and waited eagerly for a dung beetle to fly out. But the balls got thrown out along with the garbage, when the house was being cleaned!

We were all so engrossed with the cow dung and the beetles, we forgot about the cooking. The water in the rice had boiled over and fallen on the fire below, putting it out! We had to light the fire all over again and it was past 4 p.m. when we finished lunch. We took all the blackened vessels near the borewell to wash them.

The *Bugadi* plant (coat button plant ) has small flowers that can be dislodged easily. You hold the twig and hit the bottom of the flower with your fingers, like you would strike a carrom striker, and the flower goes flying. Everyone had fun, aiming at each other's cheeks. It was dark when we returned to the *haadi*. The teacher requested me to help her pack and I obliged.

A few minutes later, Basava came running and shouted, "Saa! There is a *Kolli Devva* (A ghost in the form of fire, usually seen as sparks or flames of fire). Come see it, Saa." He tugged at my arms and pulled me out.

At a distance, I saw a few sparks flying. It was as if somebody was sitting on the middle of the road and was smoking a beedi. But whenever the wind blew, there were sparks all round. I went to see what it was. The otherwise brave kids warned me not to go near! A trifle scared, nevertheless, I went ahead. It was a dried-up tuber. Someone had lit a fire in it and the red hot embers were still inside the tuber. Whenever the wind blew, the sparks from the embers flew around! Everyone was relieved it wasn't a ghost!

I returned and bid farewell to the children and the teacher who looked very sad.

"I will not be here when you come the next time. I don't know if I'll report for duty tomorrow at Kogile Haadi or I'll go home. I'll ponder over it again in the night and decide by morning".

I didn't know what to say. "The final decision is yours. Do what you feel like," I said as I got on to my bike.



## CHAPTER 16

### 15 years later...

I proceeded towards Navile Haadi after nearly 15 years. As I walked, I recalled all the fond memories I shared with the children of the forests. This environment is filled with the laughter, mirth and enthusiasm of these kids —You can smell it in the soil, breathe it in the cool air and feel it as you take every step.

Every step I take, brings back a flood of memories of the experiences I shared with the forest people and their children and the simple lives they led. How will these kids, the Madam and the environment be now, after all these years, I wondered. I was curious to see and know how the winds of change had affected them all. Except for the news that the Madam went back to her village, I hadn't heard anything more about the *haadi* or the children. As I neared the cross near the *haadi*, my curiosity and interest to meet all of them only increased.

I saw two people standing near the road turning. One was an ailing woman who was supported by a youth. I went near them and guessed they were Jenukurubas. The woman, who seemed very sick, had curled up near the road and I could hear her moaning. I asked the boy what had happened and he replied, "She is ailing for a long time. I'm taking her to the hospital now." I decided to get some information from him about Navile Haadi.

"Do all the people, who stayed earlier in Navile Haadi, still live there?"

"No Saa. Only 4-5 families are left. The rest of them have migrated to different *haadis*. Some of them have gone to Kodagu Kongamalai in search of jobs," he replied and continued.

"Are you not Sagar Sir?"

I was happy he recognised me and quickly answered in the affirmative.

"I belong to the Padukote Haadi Saa. You people used to come to our *haadi* earlier. You actually got our lands back for us. I was a small boy then," he said with a tone of gratitude. All the memories of how we had to fight for their rights flashed across my mind. The people of the neighbouring village had usurped the land of these people and when questioned, they had assaulted them. We met the Deputy Commissioner and persuaded him to visit the spot, joined the people in the dharna in front of the Taluk office for days.

As we continued our conversation, the woman who kept moaning endlessly, slowly got up and trying to gather enthusiasm into her voice said, "You are Sagar Sir, right? Couldn't you tell me earlier?" I looked at her quizzically, as she continued.

"I Saa! Jayakka! You were the one who nicknamed me as Madam's tail. Don't you remember?"

I was pleasantly surprised. The tiny little girl who was 7 or 8 years old then, a bundle of energy and always towing behind the Madam, was now a woman!

"Are you married?"

She pointed to the boy whom I had been speaking to so far! She pointed to two children who were running towards us and said the boy rolling the cycle tyre was Basava and the one behind him was Kaala. My thoughts were directed to the things with which the children played now. Fifteen years ago, these children made a bus out of the *Ugani* creeper and a big *Kaachi* fruit was their cart. Now many readymade and artificial things like the cycle tyre have replaced so many natural playthings.

Probably, like the toys, these people and their lives too are moving away from the natural surroundings. This rather sad thought made me walk up to Navile Haadi to know more about how their lives had changed.

The *haadi* today wears a deserted look. Many houses which stood here earlier were all razed to the ground and only three houses remained. Small huts just the size of a coop had come up in place of the razed houses. These houses looked so unsteady and swayed like a frail old woman who could neither stand or sit still. I could hear a faint voice from one of the huts. I heaved a sigh of relief that there was somebody atleast, with whom I could talk and gather some information.

"Anybody home?," I asked gently, when four young girls popped their heads out, gave me a quizzical look and ran back inside the hut. They seemed very shy and refused to come out in spite of all my coaxing.

According to the custom of these tribals, only girls who have attained their puberty are left in a hut like this. They will have to stay put in the huts till all the rituals are completed and only later can they participate in any other activity. I realised now why these girls were so shy. I looked around the *haadi* for some people. The structures which were once the school and the teacher's house had all been brought down. The land looked completely forsaken with wild Lantana bushes growing all over. It gave the whole place an eerie look. Every spot, the remains of every house brought back so many memories. But alas! They remained memories only and what lay before me was a sorry state of affairs. The lives of these *Girijans* had fallen flat on the rocks. Is there a possibility of them sprouting again?

As I let my thoughts roam, I heard a very faint voice from inside the hut, in front of which I was standing. "Go ask who that is."

The girls put their head out and asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Sagar from the Beechanahalli dam

Even before I finished, the girls got orders to take me in, which they promptly did, "Come in. Mare is calling you," they said in chorus, talking to

me in the Jenukuruba language, which surprised me. I wondered how! Yes, probably she must have told them about me. I recalled the fire-pits around which they all sat in the evenings, which was their gossip time! How many times during these sessions my name must have been mentioned, I thought and guessed that was how the girls assumed I knew their language. Mare - that naughty little girl who used to put us all in trouble with her constant lying, who made us laugh with her antics - I recalled all this as I entered the small hut. I was shocked when I saw her! That bundle of energy was today just a bag of bones who found it difficult to even speak! She had to labour every word she spoke to me.

The gist of what she told me was this - Everyone had gone out looking for a livelihood.

All our attempts to educate them bore no fruit. Just like we left them mid-way and went away, they too shrugged off the education which they were finding difficult to adjust to and had gone on their own paths in life.

When Mare told me that the necessity to live took them to work instead of to schools, I felt sad and dejected about the failure of the government to take a proper stance regarding the life and education of the Jenukurubas had been led to so many disasters. But it is an irony that people like Mare who had to be healthy and full of life are reduced to frail entities battling with life, in the prime of their youth!

I was very moved to see lives being pushed to desperate circumstances like this.

A boy suddenly ran into the hut and was still panting as he told me, "Saa, someone told me you have a camera which clicks photos. That's why I came to meet you, Saa." A little irritated, I asked, "So what! Who are you and what do you want now?"

"I am Jadiya, Mare's son Saa."

"People in my village said that if anyone in our *haadi* dies, the government will give us Rs. 1000 to perform the last rites. But we have to produce the

photo of the person who is dead. My mother will surely die in a couple of days. No God can save her. Why should I lose Rs. 1000 unnecessarily? Please Saa, click a snap of hers with your camera, will you?" he pleaded.

I was stunned and shocked too at his attitude towards his mother.

Displaced from their origins, these Girijans are in mid-air, not knowing where to go or what to do, finding it difficult to settle down elsewhere. This truth is something that we all can see. But what about their values? Here is a boy who wants his mother to die just to get a mere Rs.1000? Somehow all these things defy logic and is beyond any understanding, I said to myself.

Jadiya was adamant. I knew he would not spare me until I clicked a photo. "A picture of her face will not do Saa! Take a picture of her full body lying here, from head to toe." He made me click photos at different angles.

But Mare who seemed to be above all these materialistic desires, unmindful of what her son said or what I was doing, gave a faint smile, as if to mock at the dead people and dead values. Her smile threw me off! I felt the smile meant a thousand things, one of which was definitely this, "Don't laugh at us. It's not me nor my son who have become the laughing stock here. It's your damned government who displaced us and failed to find us a suitable alternative, making our lives so miserable. The government which is smiling at our fate should be ashamed!"

I couldn't help agree with this. I clicked a lot of photos of Mare, not allowing my emotions to surface in front of them. I asked Jadiya where all the people who lived here were.

"Oh! They all have gone to different *haadis* in search of livelihood."

When I asked him to be specific, he told me that some were in the neighbouring Kollegowdanahalli Haadi, some in Sonalli Haadi and a few in Matakare Haadi. A few of them have gone away to Kodagu, he added.

I returned home with a very heavy heart. I felt like letting out a big cry of anguish. My heart bled, my eyes were full. I tossed and turned in my bed the

whole night. When I got out of bed early next morning, Mare's smile seemed to console me.

"This whole system is a laughing stock. Where do people like me and you feature? Why feel so bad for this?" Her smile even when she was at the doorstep of death, made me feel that life itself was an irony.

The next day, I headed towards Kollegowdana Haadi with really heavy steps. Here I met Basavaiah, who was our companion everytime we went roaming the forests. He had grown very old now. As I was talking to him, a group of children surrounded us and kept staring at us very curiously.

Basavaiah was more interested in my motorbike than me! "Where is your bike, Saa? If that's not with you, we don't feel you are Sagar Sir!" he said reminding me that my identity was more with my bike!

There were a lot of changes in my life too in the past 15 years. "I sold it off" I replied casually and asked him about all the children who would come with us to roam the forests.

"Where are all of them?" I asked showing him the photo that I had clicked with all the children sitting around the fire-pits in front of their houses. Basavaiah recognised each of them by turns.

"Bangi is working as a labourer in Aane Gatti. Gange is dead. Gowri got married to a boy from Manti Haadi and stays with him in the same Haadi. She had a child but it died. Basava is married to a girl from Sattige Hundi and stays there. Kariya stays in Aane Gatti and has four daughters. Gudda stays in Sonehalli. Gowri's elder sister Shivamma (Mary) has 5 children. Chandra's daughter Nagamani (Naayimani) died. You know that lame boy Sannaswamy who died when you were around. Kenchaiyah who used to make toys died 5 years ago," he continued, giving me the statistics of people who had passed away.

He continued telling me about others too. Kempa is ailing, Kaala is married and has a child. Puttamma and Papaiah of the *Shishuvihar* make their living by working as labourers here and there. Kempamma too does menial

work. *Yajman* Ningaiah is the only one who owns about 2 acres of land and is pursuing agriculture.

The one point that was clear from all his talk was that not a single person continued his or her studies. They all had bid adieu to school when they were just 12 or 13 years old and had taken up coolie work right from then and continue to do so today. They have no lands nor are they entitled to any benefits from the government. They have all been scattered to find ways to have two meals a day.

Since all the *haadis* including Aanegatti, Kollegowdanahalli are small ones, there is no primary school here. If the children here want to study they need to go all the way to the Anegatti village school. It's a big challenge to study with the children of the village.

Hence, even the 8 children who are attending school may drop out someday. The children don't roam the forests frequently too. As I learnt about their present lives, I wondered when these people will get an opportunity to stop leading nomadic lives and settle down in one place or be provided with an alternative. Talking to the kids who had surrounded us, I wished that atleast the lives of these children be bright.

As I returned I felt it would have been better if I hadn't returned! Atleast I would have had pleasant memories of Navile Haadi and would have presumed that life was the same for all of them.

## Glossary

### A

Aanegatti :	Name of a settlement
Ada Donne :	Iron instrument to dig mud
Agarbatthi:	Fragrance stick
Ainora Marigudi Jaatre :	Name of a cart festival
Anthara Sante :	Name of a village
Antina Kali :	Trap to catch birds with glued sticks

### B

Beechanahalli :	Name of a village
Bettakuruba :	Name of a tribal community
Bhoothale :	Grewia Tiliifolia
Bijju :	Shikra family bird
Bisuvaare :	Beetle seen during Visu festival (New Year)
Bookanakotthi :	Type of wild cat living in holes or trunks of trees
Bugadi :	Name of a plant
Bugaei mara:	Uvarai naram

### C

Chandramakuta :	Hoopoe
Chikkadevamma :	Female deity
Chotta :	Handicapped person
Chujjala tree :	Albizia Ormara



## 100 Playing with the children of the forest

### D

Depot Mala :	Place where Forest Department sells wood
Dindalu :	Anogeissus Latifolia

### F

Fedena Vikas :	Name of a voluntary organisation
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### G

Girijans :	Forest dwelling tribes
Goballi :	Acacia Nilotica
Goruvanka birds :	Mynah
Gowda :	Upper caste name, usually referring to landowners
Gudda :	Shaman
Gullu Bale :	Trap to hunt the birds like quail

### H

Haadi :	Settlement of tribes
Haara :	A wild cat that flies from tree to tree
Haaro Kunni :	Flying beetle
Hale mara :	Alstomea Scholaris
Halli Kuncha :	Squirrel
Honge :	Pongania Pinnata
Huthri :	Festival of Coorg people

### I

Ili katri :	Trap to catch rats
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### K

Kaachi :	Jatropha plant
Kadakatthi :	Iron tool used to cut branches
Kadu Bekku :	A wild cat, as big as a dog
Kakke :	Cassia Fistula
Kodagu Kongamalai :	Terminology to refer faraway place
Kollegowdana Koppal :	Name of a settlement
Kollegowdanahalli Haadi :	Name of a settlement
Kolli Devva :	Ghost, usually seen as sparks or flames

Kote :	Name of a village
Kulli :	Short person
Kunni :	Beetle
Kuvempunagar :	Name of a place

**M**

Manandavadi :	Name of a town
Manchegowdana Haadi :	Name of a settlement
Manti Haadi :	Name of a settlement
Matakare Haadi :	Name of a settlement
Murjukotthi :	Small cat with striped skin

**N**

Naviluru :	Name of a lake
Nayi bela:	Flacourtia Indica
Nelagunasakki :	Bird of the Shikra family - Kala Basakki
Nyaya Bela :	Wild wood apple

**P**

Paaje :	Trap to catch Mynah birds
Parvatha :	Jatropha plant
Punagana :	Wild cat with Kasthuri-like aroma
Pundana hulu :	Lion ant

**R**

Ramenahalli :	Name of a village
Rasam :	A sort of curry

**S**

Saalu bale :	Series of trap nets to catch quail
Sagade :	A kind of plant
Sargur :	Name of a village
Sattige Hundi :	Name of a settlement
Seeme tangadi:	Cassia Siamea
Shirumalli :	Name of a village
Shishuvihar :	Pre-school

## 102 *Playing with the children of the forest*

Siddigalakki bird :	Jungle babbler (Seven sisters)
Sonalli Haadi :	Name of a settlement
Sunkadakatte :	Name of a forest

### **T**

Taraka :	Name of a river
Tare :	Terminalia Bellerica
Thene :	Heads of grain
Thensi Leaf :	Maytenus Acuminata
Thorny creeper:	Dioscorea Esculanta
Tittiba :	Red wattled lapwing
Toda :	Wild rat

### **U**

Ugani Hambu :	Argreia Elliptica
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### **V**

Vaale :	A species of tuber
Voddas :	Stone breakers / a caste
Yajman :	Headman

Beetles become live pinwheels, mushrooms turn into bombs and lion ants tell directions in this intimate and delightful glimpse of the life of Jenukuruba children on the fringes of forests near HD Kote, Karnataka. Ksheerasagar's fieldwork observations record the lives of this indigenous community, inter-woven with their natural environment, with candour and empathy.

Amidst a constant struggle for food, water and land, the endlessly inventive children find many ways to play with the birds, beetles and plants of the forest they have been displaced from. Plant sap proves ideal for colourful tattoos, a creeper's leaf makes an excellently shrill whistle and a buzzing beetle the perfect baton for a guessing game, as the children forage for food or escape the clutches of their loving but exasperated teacher.

Fishing or foraging expeditions are no mere outings, often determining if the children will eat that day. Yet, like the tangy gooseberries that leave behind a sweet after-taste in one of its chapters, the book paints a picture darkened with social injustice with a tender affection for the children it portrays.

Published in Kannada as *Kaadina Makkala Odanaatadalli*, National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) brings out this English translation to interest the outside world in the Community Digital Archive for the Jenukuruba people of HD Kote.

Ksheerasagar has worked extensively with the Jenukurubas of Mysore and has studied Karnataka land reforms and birds and butterflies. He works at the Jenukuruba Digital Archives, run by NFSC, Chennai, with a grant from Tata Education Trust. His published works in Kannada include *Dikku Tappida Karnataka Bhu Sudharane* (About Karnataka Land Reforms) and *Jenu Akshada Aramaneyo* (A novel about Jenukuruba).

Journalist Nandini Srinivasan is also a professional translator in Kannada and English. Her translated works include research on water management in rural India, models of adult literacy programmes, two case studies by the State Resource Centre, 'Yashassu' and 'Kalike-Galike' and 'Reasserting Their Lost Wisdom and Rights' (describing social activist Rajendra Singh's work in the villages of Rajasthan).

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